

MATTHEW·AUSTIN·

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MATTHEW AUSTIN



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BY

W. E. NORRIS

AUTHOR OF 'MDLE. DE MERSAC,' 'HIS GRACE,' ETC.

IN THREE VOLS.

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MATTHEW AUSTIN



CHAPTER I

THE DRAWBACKS OF PHILANTHROPY

THE feeling of which Lilian Murray had spoken with some apprehension was experienced to the full by Matthew after she had left Wilverton and he had fallen back into the ordinary routine of his daily life. The events of the preceding week hardly seemed real to him; he had difficulty in believing that he was in sober earnest engaged to be married to the girl whom he had for so long been satisfied, or almost satisfied, to love without hope of return or reward. The engagement, to be sure, was but provisional and contingent; he frequently had to remind himself of that, lest he should lapse from scepticism into over-credulity; still the fact remained that one of the contracting parties did not so regard it, and he was clearly bound to respect her wishes in the matter of making the same known to a few sympathetic persons.

Accordingly, he wrote to Leonard Jerome, upon whose sympathy, to tell the truth, he did not count with implicit confidence, and he was agreeably surprised to receive by return of

post a very hearty letter of congratulation from his young friend. Leonard was in London and thought it likely that he would remain there, off and on, for some months to come. He was once more, to use his own expression, 'as fit as a fiddle,' he was participating in the many forms of diversion which a community devoted rather to the development of physical than of mental perfection provides for its gilded youth, and he humbly trusted that his uncle would not be seized with any burning desire to see him again yet awhile.

'Though I should like well enough to see *you* and have a chat,' he added considerably. 'But you are sure to be coming up to town by-and-by, now that you have such a powerful magnet to attract you. Possibly I may come across Lady Sara and her fair daughter somewhere or other, and if I do, I shall not fail to tell them that in my opinion they are uncommonly lucky people. Don't you be afraid of being cut out. It is all right and highly magnanimous on your part to stand aside until the end of the season ; but unless I am much mistaken in Miss Murray she knows her own mind as well as anybody. Besides, there aren't such an awful lot of real good fellows about, and to the best of my belief there is only one Matthew Austin.'

Well, that was satisfactory : it was to be hoped that the other friends whom Matthew had been specially instructed to inform of his engagement would take the news in a similar spirit of cordiality. For reasons to which he was unable to give any definite name, Matthew felt extremely reluctant to make confession to the Frere family ; but there was no need for him to trouble himself about the matter, because they had heard the whole story

some days before he drove out to Hayes Park with the intention of enlightening them. By what means is news, true and false, promulgated with such amazing rapidity? Nobody seems to know whence the Mrs Jenningses derive their information; but there is no city, town or village so ill provided for as to lack a Mrs Jennings, and the Mrs Jennings of Wilverton was in a position to state precisely what were the conditions under which the young doctor had been permitted to style himself Miss Murray's *fiancé*. Mrs Frere, therefore, was quite ready with ungrudging felicitations, supplemented by warnings which only she knew how to offer without a shade of offensiveness.

'I shall rejoice for your sake if it does come off,' she said frankly, 'because I think the girl is nice, and she is so marvelously pretty that one would have to forgive her even if she wasn't nice. But considering how young she is and how queer some of her mother's people have been, I am sure you are quite right to leave the question open for the present. It will be so much more comfortable for you, in case of any hitch occurring, to be able to say that you anticipated it! And, if I were you, I *would* anticipate it. I always anticipate evil myself, and it is wonderful how seldom I am disappointed. Those new tea-roses, for instance: it was rather disgusting that every single one of them should die; but I had the comfort of knowing that I had never from the first expected them to thrive in that soil.'

Anne, who had been equally friendly, though less outspoken, in her reception of Matthew's tidings, interrupted these premature efforts at consolation.

'Do allow Mr Austin credit for knowing better than to plant

his roses where they can't be expected to thrive,' said she, laughing. 'I don't believe he anticipates any hitch at all, and I am sure there is no reason why his friends should.'

Anne was so pleasant and cheerful and spoke with so much kindness about Lilian that Matthew felt sincerely grateful to her ; although, upon reflection, he scarcely knew what cause he had for particular gratitude. No doubt those silly children had said some silly things to her, but it was not to be supposed that she could feel even remotely aggrieved by the downfall of their castle in the air.

Nevertheless, her manner, in talking to him, had undergone a certain change, of which he became more sensible as time went on. Being now much less busy than he had been during the winter, he was able to see his friends with greater frequency, and to the Frere family he was always a welcome visitor. Consequently, he found himself pretty often at Hayes Park ; and so it was that Anne, who no longer avoided his society, began to show herself to him under a new aspect. Her capricious moods, her alternations between shyness and expansiveness were things of the past ; she always seemed pleased to see him and never forgot to inquire what news he had from London ; but he had ceased to be her confidant. She made him aware of that in various ways, and he could not help suspecting that he had fallen a little in her esteem. Possibly she may have thought it rather silly of him to fix his affections upon a girl so much younger than himself and so unlikely to develop into the contented wife of a rural practitioner. Of Spencer she showed a marked reluctance to speak. In answer to his questions, she

said that she occasionally heard from her brother and hoped all was going on well ; but the obligation under which she had been laid by Matthew's intervention was so evidently burdensome to her that he felt a delicacy about alluding to the subject.

One morning, however, the subject was brought to his notice in a manner which, if it did not necessitate immediate communication with Anne, appeared to render prompt action on his part imperative. Sir Godfrey, whose letter was dated from the House of Commons and was couched in terms of injured remonstrance, wrote to say that he had just been made the recipient of exceedingly unpleasant information by Colonel Egerton.

‘As far as I can make out, your *protégé* has been appropriating money belonging to the sergeants' mess. At any rate, a matter of fifty pounds is said to be missing, the man is under arrest, and Colonel Egerton seems to think he is doing me a favour by saying that the worst consequences may yet be averted if the deficit is made good within the next thirty-six hours. What leads him to suppose that I shall pay up a considerable sum for the benefit of a rascal whom I never saw in my life, but whom I have good-naturedly gone out of my way to befriend, I am at a loss to imagine. Certainly I shall do no such thing, and I much regret that your representations induced me to exert myself on behalf of so undeserving a person. I think it right to tell you of what has occurred ; but if you move in the matter—beyond, perhaps, informing the man's relations—you will, in my opinion, be extremely ill-advised. I ought, perhaps, to mention that the 22d Lancers are at present quartered at Lowcester ; but of that you are probably already aware.’

Matthew sighed and unlocked his money-box to see whether he had as much as fifty pounds in hand. Fortunately or unfortunately, that amount was forthcoming, and his next act was to study Bradshaw, with the result that he discovered a train, starting in about two hours' time, which would land him at Lowcester before nightfall. He had not the slightest doubt or hesitation as to the course which it behoved him to pursue. Ill-advised it might be, in the abstract, to fly to the aid of a hopeless young ne'er-do-well, who was probably a thief into the bargain, but it was altogether out of the question that Miss Frere's brother should be committed for trial and perhaps sentenced to penal servitude.

'All the same,' reflected Matthew ruefully, 'I am afraid the fellow has ruined himself. It is all very fine to make restitution, but I don't see how they are going to get over the fact of the arrest or how he can possibly be recommended for a commission after such an episode. Dear me, what a perverse world it is, and how uncalled-for half the catastrophes that take place in it seem to be! It would have been so easy, one would have thought, to steer clear of criminal offences for one year! But the whole question, I suppose, is one of temptation and adequate power of resistance.'

That, no doubt, is the whole question, and a deeply discouraging one it is to ruminate upon. To give his thoughts a pleasanter turn, Matthew reverted to a long letter from Lilian, which he had perused before opening his brother's and which seemed to show that her powers of resistance, so far, were all that could be desired. She had passed through the formidable

ceremony of presentation, she had been to half a dozen balls and was going to at least half a dozen more, engagements of every kind were multiplying, 'and I loathe it all!' she declared. 'It is quite as bad as I thought it would be—worse, in some ways—and my only wish is to get to the end of it. Can you look three months ahead? I can't; though I am always trying. I feel like Eurydice in the lower regions, and I know the last thing you would ever think of doing would be to come and play Orpheus to me. However, I shall emerge of my own accord when the time comes; you need have no fears on that score.'

It was in this strain that she habitually wrote, and many lovers would have detected an undertone of uneasiness in it. Why protest so much? Why anathematise what, after all, must needs be novel and exciting to every young girl? Lilian would have been more convincing if she had been less vehement. But Matthew was too loyal to seek for symptoms of disloyalty. Moreover, he said to himself that this preliminary petulance would soon give way to a more reasonable frame of mind. He did not want Lilian to be disgusted with the fashionable world, though of course he could not wish her to become enamoured of it.

Meanwhile, he had to pack up some clothes and make a few arrangements, because it was certain that he could not count upon being back before the following afternoon. There was nothing, he found, to prevent him from absenting himself for four-and-twenty hours, and, having told the servants that he had been unexpectedly called away—an incident which was not so uncommon as to give rise to conjecture—he set forth on his tedious cross-country railway journey.

Lowcester, a decorous, somnolent cathedral-city, upon the outskirts of which the cavalry barracks were situated, boasted, as he was informed by a friendly porter, of two very excellent hotels. The porter was unwilling to draw invidious distinctions, but went so far as to say that he believed the 'Rose and Crown' to be rather more extensively patronised by the nobility and gentry than the 'Golden Lion.' Matthew, therefore, had himself and his modest belongings conveyed to the 'Rose and Crown,' where he was shown into a vast, mouldy-smelling bedroom and was told that, by giving due notice, he could have anything he liked for dinner. He replied that, under those circumstances, he would have anything that the cook liked to give him; after which he requested to be furnished with Colonel Egerton's address. Rather to his surprise, the landlord denied all knowledge of such a person, remarking, with an air of lofty superiority, that he had never had any personal dealings with 'the military.' It is necessary to visit a country town, dominated by clerical influence, in order to arrive at any idea of the low esteem in which Her Majesty's forces are held by a section of Her Majesty's subjects. However, some less haughty and exclusive individual—possibly the ostler—was discovered about the premises, from whom it was ascertained that Colonel Egerton and his family resided at The White Lodge, a quarter of a mile or so away.

'Bother his family!' thought Matthew, as, in pursuance of instructions, he walked along the grass-grown High Street towards the suburb where Colonel Egerton had taken up his temporary abode; 'I never thought of his being a married man,

and I would a little rather not have this surreptitious visit of mine talked about by inquisitive ladies. I suppose he will grant me a private audience, though, if I say I have come upon business?’

There was the less difficulty about that because Colonel Egerton’s wife and daughters happened to be smart personages who had gone up to London for the season, leaving the head of the family to shift for himself at the post of duty during their absence. The colonel, a dapper little good-humoured man, with a waxed, grey moustache, stepped out into the hall, after Matthew’s card had been carried to him, and shook his visitor cordially by the hand.

Very glad to see you,’ said he; ‘I know what has brought you here; I’ve heard of the kind interest that you have taken in that confounded young jackanapes.’

He drew Matthew into the spacious, comfortably-furnished smoking-room which he was inhabiting during his period of enforced bachelorhood, pushed a box of cigars across the table, lighted one himself, sank into an easy chair, and began:

‘Well, now, I had better tell you at once, Mr Austin, that the money will have to be paid. I’m ready to do what I can, but unless the money is forthcoming, I shall be powerless.’

‘Oh, I have brought the money,’ said Matthew.

‘You have, eh? Has his father been told, then?’

‘Well, no. For many reasons, it would not have been advisable to tell his father.’

‘Then who—but that’s none of my business, you’ll say. H’m!—well, if the amount missing is made good in time,

nothing more need be said about it, and I can simply try the fellow on a charge of drunkenness and insubordination, for which he has been placed under arrest. Bad enough, of course, but a flea-bite compared with the other.'

'Drunkenness and insubordination!' echoed Matthew, in dismay.

'Oh, Lord, yes! your friend has been distinguishing himself, I can tell you. Wanted to be dismissed from the service, I daresay, and couldn't think of any better means than that of effecting his object. Always the way with these beggars!—sooner or later they're bound to get desperate and play Old Harry!'

'But I should have thought that he had the best of reasons for being anything but desperate just now.'

'Ah, I'm not so sure of that. If you or I had misappropriated money and didn't see our way to replace it, we should be rather near desperation, I suppose. Mind, I know nothing of this officially; I only learnt by a side-wind what was bound to come out at the court-martial, and that was why I wired to Sir Godfrey. Therefore, anything that I may tell you about young Frere—for I presume you haven't heard his story and would like to hear it?—must be regarded as strictly confidential, please.'

'I quite understand that,' answered Matthew, 'and I should certainly like to hear what has happened. I may say that I have no personal acquaintance with the culprit, although I know his people very well.'

Colonel Egerton glanced at the disinterested friend of the

family with a half-humorous, half-compassionate twinkle in his eye. No doubt he was thinking to himself, 'Either this man is a misguided philanthropist or else he is in love with one of Frere's sisters.' So clever does a middle-aged man of the world and experienced commander of a regiment become. But if Mr Austin liked to expend fifty pounds in rescuing a malefactor from the clutches of justice, that, after all, was Mr Austin's affair; so the colonel cleared his voice and embarked upon his succinct narrative without irrelevant comments.

'I need hardly tell you that there's a woman in the business; I never knew a bad job yet but a woman was connected with it in some way or other, and Frere has been getting into scrapes of that kind ever since he did my regiment the honour to enlist in it. There is no occasion to trouble you with bygone histories, but I daresay you can guess the sort of troubles that are apt to arise when you have a good-looking, swaggering young sergeant, whom everybody knows to be a gentleman and who, I suspect, is a little bit given to romancing about his rank and prospects and so forth. The cause of the present calamity is a certain Mrs Johnson, or Jackson, or Thompson—hanged if I remember the woman's name!—a vulgar little over-dressed, yellow-haired widow, whom several of our young fellows have been running after. She is said to be well off—whether truly or untruly I'm sure I can't say. She has chosen to take up Frere and make much of him; which, as you may imagine, has brought about a good deal of unpleasantness. There is some story about a jewelled bangle that he gave her, and about her wearing it ostentatiously at a race-meeting here the other day.

Naturally, he couldn't have paid for it, and from what I hear, I fancy she must have run him into debt also for flowers and bonbons and other rubbish. The upshot of it all, I have no doubt, was that, being hardly pressed and having, unfortunately, access to money which didn't belong to him, he went to the races and failed to back winners. Anyhow, it was after the races that he was found reeling about the streets, and he wasn't got back to barracks without a scuffle, confound him! Now, have I made the situation clear to you?'

'As clear as is necessary, I think,' answered Matthew, with a mournful grimace. 'I suppose he may say good-bye to his chance of a commission after this?'

The colonel jerked up his shoulders.

'What can we do?' he asked. 'He has no defence, and discipline must be maintained. I tell you frankly that if I were his father, I should purchase his discharge; I don't believe he will ever do any good at soldiering now. One is sorry, of course, but one has done one's best. You would like to see him, I suppose?'

'Yes, I had better see him, if I may,' answered Matthew, without much alacrity. 'Where is he?—in solitary confinement?'

'No, he's in hospital at present—either sick or malingering. I'll tell you what, Mr Austin; if you'll do me the favour to dine with me at our mess to-night—I can't ask you to dine here, because my wife is away, and a kitchen-maid is considered good enough for the likes of me in her absence—I'll introduce you to Bowker, our medico, who will arrange for you to have a talk with the man either to-night or to-morrow morning.'

Matthew thanked the hospitable colonel, but begged to be excused. He was anxious, he said, to conceal the fact of his visit to Lowcester, if possible, and the fewer people who were made aware of it the better he would be pleased.

‘All right,’ answered Colonel Egerton, nodding good-naturedly; ‘I understand. I’ll say a word to Bowker, then, and he’ll look you up the first thing in the morning. Very good fellow, Bowker, and no chatterbox. Now, Mr Austin, I don’t want to meddle with what doesn’t concern me, but there is just one thing that I should like to say. Somebody, of course, has been and is helping Frere out with money, and I gather from what you tell me that it isn’t his father. Well, I should strongly advise that person to cut off the supplies. He is one of those happy-go-lucky fellows who will take all he can get and never stop to say thank you. Sooner or later, the cost of supporting him must needs fall upon his father, and there’s nothing to be gained by mystery and postponement. If he were my son, I should make him a small annual allowance, upon the condition that he sailed at once for Australia and stayed there. He’ll never keep out of trouble in this country, you may depend upon it.’

‘Thank you,’ answered Matthew; ‘you are probably right, and I will think over what you have said. All hope of a commission must be abandoned, I presume?’

‘Oh, I don’t say that he might not eventually get his commission, if he were to turn over a new leaf; but it stands to reason that he would have to wait a longish time for it, and I confess that I shouldn’t feel at all sanguine on his behalf.’

There was nothing more to be said, and Matthew went away with a strong impression upon his mind that he was about to make a very unprofitable, though unavoidable, investment.

CHAPTER II

AN IMPENITENT SINNER

MATTHEW had not finished his breakfast, on the following morning, when his military colleague called, in obedience to instructions, to conduct him to the hospital. There was very little to be got out of this tall, spare, saturnine personage, who appeared to merit the character given him by his colonel for being no chatterbox.

‘Nothing of consequence,’ he said, in reply to Matthew’s inquiries. ‘Effects of drink and a shock, that’s all. Usual thing—nervous system all to pieces.’

‘But I understand that he doesn’t drink habitually,’ Matthew said.

The taciturn Bowker made no answer until the remark had been repeated, when he observed,—

‘Well, you can look at him and form your own opinion. As a matter of fact, he is fit to go back to the cells; but I have kept him on the sick-list because—’

He shrugged his shoulders slightly by way of completing the sentence.

On the road to the hospital Matthew thought it best to say a word or two upon a subject as to which his companion manifested no impertinent curiosity.

‘I suppose you are acquainted with the circumstances?’ he began.

‘Yes, I have heard something, and the colonel spoke to me last night. Glad to hear you have brought the money. I was to tell you that if you would hand it over to me, it should be placed where it ought to be. You can’t very well give it to the man himself, you see.’

‘I suppose not,’ Matthew agreed. ‘Here are ten five-pound notes, then, if you’ll kindly take charge of them. May I ask what punishment is likely to be inflicted upon him for the minor offence?’

‘Oh, they’ll have to reduce him to the ranks, I should say. Lucky fellow to get off so cheap!’

‘Yes—only that means something very like ruin in his case, I am afraid.’

‘Well, I take it that he was practically ruined some time ago. Bound to go to the deuce sooner or later; men of that stamp invariably do. Can’t afford to knock themselves about like the average Tommy—haven’t the stamina.’

After a long pause, Matthew asked,—

‘Is he liked in the regiment?’

‘I believe the men rather like him; he is a fine horseman and he knows how to use his fists. But he has made himself obnoxious to the officers in more ways than one. Pleasant fellow, too, in some respects; glad he is to escape the worst consequences of his tomfoolery.’

Tomfoolery seemed a lenient term to apply to the misdeeds of which Spencer Frere had presumably been guilty; yet when

Matthew was brought face to face with the culprit, he almost believed it to be appropriate. For this long-legged, fair-complexioned fellow, in hospital clothes, who was found sitting on a sunny bench, with his back turned to the great, bare building, really did not look much like a hardened sinner. His manner, it is true, was defiant, not to say offensive; but that, Matthew thought, was only natural under the circumstances. Courage, the one good quality which sometimes survives self-respect, is apt to manifest itself after offensive fashions when left to stand alone.

‘So you are Anne’s friend, the doctor,’ said he, after the other doctor had discreetly withdrawn out of earshot. ‘Very good of you to take all this trouble, I’m sure; but one must presume that you have your reasons. And you have brought the missing money with you, old Bowker tells me.’

‘Yes; it will be all right, as far as the money is concerned,’ Matthew answered, seating himself beside the subject of his benevolence and endeavouring, by a sidelong scrutiny, to take his measure.

‘Ah!—well, I didn’t ask for it, you know, but I won’t deny that I feel a little relieved. It’s hard lines on poor old Anne to have to pay up fifty quid, though. How the dickens she managed to raise it is what beats me! She’ll have to go tick for the rest of the year, I expect.’

‘You might have thought of that before, might you not?’ said Matthew, who had no wish to proclaim himself as Spencer’s benefactor.

‘I might—as you very sagaciously remark. But the unfor-

fortunate thing about me is that I am not much in the habit of thinking. By the way, I don't suppose for a moment that you'll believe me, but I didn't steal that money. At all events, I didn't steal it intentionally, and what has become of it I know no more than the man in the moon.'

'Since you tell me so, I believe you,' answered Matthew.

'The deuce you do! You must be a precious sight more credulous than doctors in general, then. My experience is that doctors, as a rule, won't believe you on your oath. Look at old Bowker, for instance, who will have it that I'm an habitual drunkard. As if I should mind owning to that, supposing it were true! All the same, it happens to be true that I'm not a thief in the common sense of the word. I went to the races, not knowing how much I had in my pocket, backed the wrong ones, returned to barracks without a sixpence, and it wasn't until then that I found out what I had done.'

Well, this might be the truth; but certainly a robust faith was required in order to accept such an explanation of the disappearance of fifty pounds from the possession of a non-commissioned officer who, in all probability, could seldom have had fifty shillings to play with. Spencer must have felt that his story was a lame one, for presently he added, with a laugh,—

'I believe I was robbed—if that improves matters. I'm sure I couldn't have staked the lot. But the fact is that I have never had any head for figures, and so I told those fellows when they insisted upon entrusting me with the mess-money. They ought never to have done such a thing.'

Matthew did not inquire how and why money belonging

to the sergeants' mess had come to be in the pocket of the man with no head for figures at a race-meeting; he merely observed,—

‘Of course it would have been easy enough for anyone to rob you while you were under the influence of liquor.’

‘Perfectly easy. As far as that goes, there isn’t any very great difficulty about robbing me even when I am sober. Well, it’s useless to cry over spilt milk, but, as matters have turned out, I wish I had allowed them to arrest me without a row.’

‘I wish with all my heart that you had. It is most unlucky.’

‘Very unlucky indeed for me; I don’t know that *you* have any special reason for pulling a long face over it. That is, unless you have already begun to associate yourself with the misfortunes of the family.’ He stretched out his legs and indulged in a low laugh which was evidently intended to be insolent. ‘The family is not looking up,’ he resumed. ‘I don’t wish to breathe a word against your useful and admirable profession, but there was a time, not so very long ago, when we should have thought our woman-kind entitled to choose their husbands from a rather more exalted class.’

Matthew kept his temper.

‘I am not going to quarrel with you,’ said he good-humouredly; ‘please make up your mind to that, and at the same time let me assure you that your family is in no danger of disgracing itself by a misalliance, so far as I am concerned. There is nothing of the kind that you imagine between your sister and me.’

‘Really? Then why in the world are you here, I wonder?’

‘Well, for a variety of reasons. Chiefly, I suppose, because somebody had to come, and because no one else happened to be available. I think I may venture to describe myself as your sister’s friend, and it would simplify matters if you would accept me in that capacity. I should be very glad to act as your friend also, if I could see any way in which my friendship was likely to be of service to you; but, frankly speaking, I don’t just at present.’

For a moment Spencer Frere looked almost ashamed of himself; but he had resumed his previous air of bravado before he returned:

‘Oh, I’m much indebted to you, as it is. I know you have put yourself out to get the promise of a commission for me, and you must be wishing by this time that you had left the thing alone. Especially as you disclaim the only motive which, I should have thought, might account for your behaviour. I am sorry that you saw fit to interest yourself in so worthless a specimen of humanity, but—well, I never requested you to do so, did I?’

No reply was forthcoming to this pertinent or impertinent query; but after a pause of some moments, Matthew asked abruptly,—

‘How long have you been in the habit of taking morphia?’
His neighbour started and gave a low whistle.

‘Now, how the deuce,’ he exclaimed, ‘did you know that I have been taking morphia? Bowker never thought of that, though he was the first man to administer it to me.’

‘I didn’t know for certain; nobody could by looking at

you, and of course it must be some days since you had your last dose. But there are several trifling symptoms which might possibly be due to that cause, and it is very evident to me that you have never been a tippler. Now, Frere, you had better take my word, as that of a medical man, for it that you must break yourself of this habit. It can hardly be a confirmed one yet, and unless you beat it, it will assuredly beat you. In which case, you might as well blow out your brains at once. You began in order to relieve some pain, no doubt—sciatica, perhaps?’

‘No,’ answered the other; ‘what let me into the secret was that about a couple of months ago my horse trod pretty heavily on my foot while I was dressing him. They had to remove a toe-nail, and for a few days the place hurt like blazes. So old Bowker injected morphia—which suggested a happy thought to me. Since it was so easy and comparatively inexpensive a matter to get rid of all one’s troubles, physical and mental, for a bit, why shouldn’t I treat myself to the luxury when I felt inclined? You may think that my mental troubles don’t press very severely upon me, but that’s all you know about it! There are times, I can tell you, when life in the British army is a precious good imitation of a hell upon earth. It isn’t so bad for N.C.O.’s, I admit; still I had worries of my own, independent of the service.’

He paused and twisted his fair moustache gloomily, while Matthew remarked,—

‘Worries connected with the other sex, I daresay.’

Spencer, who had been speaking without affectation and in

almost penitent accents, instantly assumed an expression of fatuous self-complacency.

‘Oh, the colonel has been telling you tales, has he?’ said he. ‘Well, upon my word, I can’t help it! Women are always getting me into a mess; but it’s a great deal more their fault than mine. If they would only exercise a little common prudence, these encounters with irate husbands might be avoided, and—’

‘But I thought the lady was a widow,’ interrupted Matthew.

‘What lady? Oh, little Mrs Johnson. Yes, I believe Mr Johnson is quite dead and buried, and, between ourselves, I have sometimes thought that it might be my destiny to replace him. I may do it yet—who knows? Beggars mustn’t be choosers, and although the fair Arabella—her name is Arabella—is not precisely the incarnation of refinement, she has a snug little income of her own. Whether this business will put her off at all I don’t know; but I shouldn’t think it would. She has such a high respect for my ancestry.’

Matthew could not help for a moment regarding poor Mrs Johnson in the light of a possible *dea ex machinâ*; but he put the thought away, as being too cynical, and said rather severely:

‘It would be no bad thing if you had a little more respect both for your ancestors and for yourself. What possessed you to go and get drunk after you had discovered that that money was missing? Was it sheer recklessness?’

‘That would have been it, no doubt, if I had gone out and got drunk; but, as a fact, I didn’t. If you care to know what was the matter with me when I was collared, I don’t mind telling

you. I knew there was no chance of escape for me, and I made up my mind to chuck it. Life as a convict, or even as a ranker, isn't so delightful as to be worth preserving when you can put an end to yourself without pain. Only I suppose I didn't know how much morphia goes to a poison-dose, for all the effect it had upon me was to make me dazed and stupid. As soon as I found out that I wasn't going to die, off I started to the chemist's to buy some more, making fine zigzags on the way, I daresay. Anyhow, these blundering fools got hold of me and wanted to lock me up for being drunk in the streets. Some of them had a grudge against me, I believe ; but whether that was so or not, I was bound to show fight. As I told you just now, I wish I hadn't ; still, if I hadn't, I should have been charged with drunkenness all the same ; so perhaps it doesn't make very much odds.'

'I am glad, at all events, that you were preserved from committing suicide,' Matthew remarked.

'It is very polite of you to say so ; but my own impression is that my disappearance from these earthly scenes would have been a distinct advantage to some people and a misfortune for nobody. Will you please tell Anne that I am infinitely obliged to her, but that she had much better drop me for the future. I won't go so far as to admit that I have always been a blackguard, but nothing can be more positive than that I am an irreclaimable blackguard now. She will never get any comfort out of me, and if she persists in befriending me, I shall only get her into fresh trouble. The governor understands me a good deal better than she does.'

A hardened miscreant would scarcely have said that, Matthew thought. At all events, it seemed worth while to reason with him, and nobody could be more persuasive than Matthew, because nobody could have a wider range of sympathy with human nature in all its varying and contradictory phases. If, at the end of a somewhat protracted homily, Spencer Frere remained ostentatiously unrepentant, if he derided the popular axiom that it is never too late to mend, and if he refused to make any rash promises respecting his own future conduct, he nevertheless had the good grace to thank his mentor heartily.

‘You mean well,’ he said. ‘I’m sorry I spoke so brutally about your profession—when a man is down on his luck he says all sorts of things that he doesn’t mean, you know—and I’m really and truly grateful to you. What can I do to show my gratitude?’

‘Well, you can do this,’ Matthew answered: ‘you can spare your sister as much as is possible. Of course, when you write to her, you will have to tell her about the court-martial and its results, but you need not say anything about the pecuniary part of the business. I am sure she would rather that you didn’t, and I ask you, as a personal favour, not to do so. As regards the future, I hope I may trust you to refrain from appealing to her for pecuniary help again.’

‘Upon my oath, I never will; I don’t mind binding myself to that extent.’

‘Very well. Then, as regards the present, I have one thing more to say. I don’t feel at liberty to explain exactly how I am situated, but so it is that I have a little money still left at your

disposal, and the wish of your friends is that all outstanding bills should be paid. Will you tell me honestly how much you owe and to whom you owe it ?'

Spencer complied with this request, naming a sum which fell short of Matthew's anticipations, and soon afterwards the two men parted. It was agreed that the younger should submit to the punishment which was his due, and possess his soul in patience for the time being. As to his ultimate destiny he seemed to be curiously indifferent.

'Oh, I shall live or die, sink or swim,' said he, with a laugh ; 'it will be all the same a hundred years hence, anyhow. But if ever I have it in my power to do you a good turn, Mr Austin, you'll find that I haven't forgotten you.'

CHAPTER III

HUMBLE PIE

MANY plausible arguments may be adduced in favour of hard-heartedness, but that to which the fullest support is lent by experience is that helping a lame dog over a stile means acquiring possession of that dog, together with the privilege of paying for his annual license until the end of his earthly career. Now, one really cannot be expected to stock one's premises with curs, even if one could afford to do so. There are Homes for Lost Dogs (in which a well-appointed lethal chamber is provided), so that a man who is at once wise and humane will avert his gaze when he sees a luckless specimen of the canine race in difficulties. Who has not received those dreadful letters which begin, 'Relying upon your kindness to me in the past, I feel encouraged to hope that you will assist me in the present emergency'? And who does not know that 'the present emergency' implies future emergencies and many of them? 'You have been fool enough to help me once,' the writer seems to say, with pitiless logic; 'it is therefore reasonable to believe that you will remain a fool to the end of the chapter.' And the writer's sagacity seldom misleads him.

It was something of this sort that Matthew was saying to

himself as he sat in the railway-carriage, on his return journey to Wilverton. He had chosen to rush in where persons more legitimately concerned might very well have feared to tread ; he had in a certain sense made himself responsible for Spencer Frere, and his responsibility could hardly end with the payment of that worthy's bills. The payment of the bills had in itself been a somewhat unpleasant job, exposing him to queries from inquisitive tradesmen and altogether rendering him more conspicuous than he could have wished. Colonel Egerton, moreover, though declaring emphatically that, upon his word, 'the fellow ought to be devilish grateful to you, sir,' had allowed it be inferred that he did not personally anticipate that result ; while the taciturn Bowker had summed up the situation with the concise remark of 'Mere question of time, you'll find.'

'Still,' reflected Matthew, 'I don't see how I could have acted otherwise. It *is* on the cards that he may turn over a new leaf ; it *is* on the cards that I may eventually be able to discover some opening for him ; and even if I can't, there's no particular harm done. The most awkward thing of all will be my first interview with his sister. Whatever happens, she must not suspect that he has been charged with stealing, or that I have mixed myself up in the business. One comfort is that the story of drunkenness and insubordination will scarcely surprise her ; she has had so many misgivings from the outset.'

Nevertheless, he had a powerful and pusillanimous longing to defer that necessary conversation with Anne, and much relieved was he to hear, on the morrow, that circumstances had granted him a respite. The Frere family—so he was informed—

had departed to the sea-side for a few weeks, leaving Hayes Park in the hands of painters and paper-hangers ; so that, unless he wrote to Spencer's sister—which he did not feel called upon to do—he might look forward to a period of tranquil and uninterrupted attention to his own affairs.

These were, for the moment, of a recreative rather than a professional nature. Wilverton was at its dullest and emptiest, patients were few, while well-ordered gardens might be said to be almost at their best. To breakfast leisurely and late, to saunter out into the sunshine, to count the buds upon the rose-bushes, to note with thankfulness the absence of green-fly and maggots, to hold long colloquies with the gardener, afterwards, perhaps, to loll for half-an-hour or so in a hammock beneath the great copper-beech, with a book and a cigarette—all this was delightful to Matthew, who, unlike the majority of hard-working men, secretly adored laziness. Then, too, his letters were so pleasant to read that they could well bear a second and a third perusal. By degrees, and almost imperceptibly, the tone of Lilian's correspondence was changing, and the change, he thought, was decidedly for the better. There had been something unnatural, something almost insincere—though he did not make use of that term—in the vehement dislike which she had begun by expressing for London and its society, but which she had now suffered to drop into abeyance.

'After all,' she said, in one of her voluminous, hastily-scribbled epistles, 'I am glad to have seen what the smart world is like. I don't want to live in it ; still, I can quite understand there being people who would rather not live at all than

live out of it. Sometimes I wish you were here—no, I don't mean that; of course I *always* wish you were here—but I sometimes wish you could look on at my little triumphs. Would you utterly despise them, I wonder, or would you think there was rather more in me than you used to imagine? I feel hundreds and hundreds of years older than I did in those days, and mamma would tell you that I have immensely improved. I haven't changed, though—no, not the least little bit!—and if she thinks I have, she is very much mistaken.'

'But of course she must have changed in some respects,' was Matthew's inward comment; 'it would be against nature if she hadn't. Besides, she admits it.' And always, in answering her letters, he was careful to say how little he grudged her the triumphs of which she spoke. Perhaps also he would not have minded looking on at them; certainly he would have liked very much to run up to London for a week or ten days. But he felt that he would hardly be fulfilling his part of the compact, were he to yield to that temptation. Lady Sara had treated him fairly, not to say generously, and the least he could do was to remain in the background until the stipulated truce should have expired.

Thus in unbroken quietude and almost unbroken solitude those warm days of early summer passed away for him pleasantly enough—blue, hazy days, during which light breezes from every point of the compass rose and fell, and the air was full of the song of birds, and fleecy clouds melted into mist towards sunset. A few lines from Colonel Egerton, who had good-naturedly asked for his address, informed him of Spencer Frere's sentence, which indeed had been a foregone conclusion.

‘It’s bad, but it might have been a great deal worse,’ the colonel wrote. ‘Perhaps the loss of his gold lace and a taste of the bread and water of affliction may bring him to his senses ; still I can only repeat that I believe the best thing his father can do with him now is to take him out of this and pack him off to the Colonies.’

At any rate, Matthew could take no step at present ; so he laid the subject aside for future consideration, as doctors, lawyers and other men whose duty it is to consider a variety of puzzling cases soon acquire a faculty for doing at will.

The end of this period of repose and seclusion was reached one afternoon when Mrs Jennings stopped her carriage to beckon to him and express a gracious wish that he would show himself at her garden-party on the following day.

‘I forget whether I sent you a card or not,’ said she. ‘If I didn’t, it was only because I know that you eschew daylight entertainments. Of course you are quite right, and during the busy season Dr Jennings will only accept even dinner invitations provisionally ; but just now you must have a good deal of spare time on your hands, so I hope you will come to us. You will meet your friends the Freres if you do ; I daresay you have heard that they returned home yesterday.’

Matthew had not heard of that circumstance, but now that it had been made known to him, he felt compelled to swallow down the excuse which he had already opened his lips to formulate. Since Anne was once more within reach, it would not do

for him to shirk an occasion of meeting her, nor was he sorry that their first meeting was to be a quasi-public one. A crowded garden-party—and Mrs Jennings would have deemed herself socially disgraced if any party of hers had not been crowded—would afford better opportunities for the exercise of duplicity than could be hoped for from the afternoon call which politeness would render it incumbent upon him to pay ere long.

What disconcerted, and even alarmed, him a little was the manner of his reception by the lady whom he proposed to deceive. Soon after his arrival upon the scene of festivity he made his way to her side through an intervening throng of Browns, Joneses and Robinsons, and it was without the faintest smile that she returned his greeting. Anne was looking very handsome, in a new French-grey costume which fitted her to perfection; she was also looking very grave, and she was so evidently displeased with him that her displeasure could scarcely be ignored. Did she think that he ought to have written to her?—or had she, by means of one of those strange feminine processes of reasoning which must remain for ever inscrutable to the male mind, arrived at the conclusion that he was in some way to blame for the catastrophe that had overtaken Spencer? The only way to find out what was the matter was to ask her; so he began, without preface:

‘You have heard from your brother?’

‘Yes,’ she answered, ‘I have heard from him; I must speak to you about it. I am afraid,’ she added, looking round her with an irritated frown, ‘there is no secluded place to which we can go; but if we were to get behind that brass band which is

making such a horrible noise, we should at least run no risk of being overheard.'

The fact was that Mrs Jennings's pleasure-grounds were of somewhat circumscribed area, and her invitation had been responded to by about three hundred people. These, however, in accordance with the national habit, had packed themselves closely together on the terrace fronting the house; so that comparative solitude was obtainable at a reasonable distance from the braying band and on the further side of the screen afforded by a clump of rhododendrons.

'Godfrey wrote to tell me of your brother's—misfortune,' Matthew said. 'Of course I would have let you know of it, only I felt sure that you would hear, and—and there wasn't much to be said, unluckily.'

'There was nothing to be said,' assented Anne; 'I never expected you to write.' She added, with an obvious effort, 'I am extremely grateful to you for all that you have done for Spencer.'

Neither her face nor her voice conveyed the impression of extreme gratitude; but Matthew hastened to assure her that nothing of the sort was owing to him.

'There was no great trouble involved in writing a few letters and calling at the War Office,' he remarked; 'I only wish the result had been more successful. As it is, I am afraid our hopes of getting a commission must be laid aside for some little time to come.'

'He will never get his commission now; I was not thinking of that,' Anne rejoined. 'Of course, we are very much

indebted to you for having secured him the chance; but debts of that kind may be submitted to, I suppose, without—without downright humiliation. What I cannot understand your having imagined is that we would allow you to pay a large sum of money for us secretly.'

Matthew's jaw fell.

'Confound the stupid idiot!' he ejaculated inwardly. Aloud he said, 'I am afraid your brother must have broken his word. He promised me that that part of the business should be between ourselves.'

'Have I not always warned you,' returned Anne, with a dreary little laugh, 'that there is no dependence to be placed upon Spencer? He did not betray you in his first letter, but I knew, from the way in which he expressed himself, that there must be more behind, and by degrees the whole story came out. I am glad it has come out; though I can't pretend to be glad that you should have—'

'Been so impertinent and officious?' suggested Matthew, since she seemed at a loss to conclude her sentence. She neither confirmed nor disputed the sentiments ascribed to her; so he went on. 'I am very sorry that you have heard of this, and still more sorry to have offended you; but I am sure, if you will think of it, you will see that I couldn't have acted in any other way. It was absolutely necessary that the money should be paid, and there was no time to consult anybody. If I had driven out to Hayes Park, upon the chance of seeing you, after Godfrey's letter reached me, I should have been too late.'

Anne had pulled one of the tough leaves off the shrub beside which she was standing, and had begun to tear it into strips.

‘I know that you saved him, and I know that we can never be thankful enough to you for your promptitude,’ she answered slowly. ‘But why did you make a secret of it? Why did you leave me to find out for myself what you had done?’

‘Was it so very unpardonable that I should wish to spare you all the distress I could?’

‘Oh, not unpardonable, perhaps; but I think—well, I think it was rather a mistake. I suppose you would not quite like it if you were to discover that I had been paying your tradesmen’s bills for you?’

‘My dear Miss Frere, I have not been paying any bill for you, and it would never occur to me to take such a liberty. Surely, if I feel inclined to give or lend fifty pounds to a man of my acquaintance, that is a matter which only concerns him and me.’

‘It was a good deal more than fifty pounds; but the question, as you know, was not one between you and a man of your acquaintance. You gave Spencer to understand that the money came from me; how can you tell that he would have accepted it if you had spoken the truth?’

Matthew wished with all his heart that he had told the truth; for he felt very sure that Spencer’s scruples would have been easily overcome. All he could find to say for himself was:

‘I acted for the best.’

‘I quite believe that you did,’ Anne replied, in somewhat less severe accents; ‘only—however, there is no use in saying any more about it. Of course you must be repaid.’

This was exceedingly painful, and the worst of it was that refusals or protests could only give additional offence.

‘What have I done,’ Matthew exclaimed, after a rather long pause, ‘that you should treat me with such unfriendliness? Why may I not remain your brother’s creditor for a time? Indeed it is not at all an uncommon thing for a man to borrow a small sum from a friend in an emergency. If I have never done it myself, that is simply owing to the accident of my never having been hard up; I should be afraid to say how many times I have lent money to other people.’

‘And how many times have you received your money back? But nothing was said about a loan in this case. You represented to Spencer that the money came from me, and it is I who am responsible to you for it.’

In vain Matthew declared that, to the best of his recollection and belief, he had made no such misrepresentation. He had, he candidly owned, allowed her brother to form his own conclusions, but that had been merely as a measure of expediency and to avoid needless discussion. For the rest, he would, if she wished it, write a few lines to Lowcester that evening and explain.

Anne would have none of these specious excuses. Her name had been made use of, she said, and Mr Austin must surely understand that it was impossible for her to accept either a loan or a gift of money from him. This was very dignified

and quite unanswerable ; but poor Anne, to her shame and sorrow, was unable to follow up her declaration of independence by practical proof of it. Her pale face flushed distressingly, and she had to clear away an obstruction in her throat before she could continue :

‘Unfortunately, I must ask you to allow me a little time and to let me discharge my debt by instalments. My allowance, as I think I have told you before, is not a large one, and I have had a good many unforeseen expenses lately. I do not see how it can be less than a year—’

‘Miss Frere,’ interrupted Matthew, ‘I think you are behaving most unkindly and ungenerously, and it doesn’t seem to me that I have deserved such treatment. However, since you will have it so, let it be so ; I do not wish you to feel that you are under any obligation—even an imaginary one—to me. But at least I may be allowed to mention that it will make not the slightest difference to me whether I am repaid to-day or ten years hence. The only doubt in my mind is whether I am justified in keeping all this from your father’s knowledge any longer.’

‘Ah, you are determined to spare me nothing !’ exclaimed Anne, clasping her hands together. ‘But of course you are quite right ; I have no business to assume false airs of pride when I ought to be humbling myself in the dust before you. If you tell my father—and that, I have no doubt, would be the proper thing to do—you will be thanked as you deserve, and Spencer’s debts will be paid once more.’

‘Only you would rather that I did not tell ?’

Anne looked down.

‘It would be the last straw,’ she said. ‘Spencer would never be forgiven—never! Oh, I know I am ungenerous and ungracious—I can’t help it. You must think what you please of me, but I do *hate* to have to ask this additional favour!’

‘Then you shall not ask it. From purely selfish motives, I am reluctant to let Mr Frere know that I have been busying myself on the sly with his family affairs, and I don’t intend to do so. I must admit, too, that allowing your name to be dragged into this business was both stupid and unwarrantable on my part. Your brother, by my way of thinking, might very well have accepted a little temporary aid from me, but I quite understand that you cannot—or will not. Will you accept my sincere apologies, and believe that, however thoughtless and clumsy I may have been, the last thing that I meant, or could have meant, was to humiliate you?’

He extended his hand half-involuntarily, and Anne’s gloved fingers advanced to meet it.

‘You are as generous as I am the reverse,’ she said constrainedly. ‘One is what one is—there is no help for it. Still, I don’t think I am altogether in the wrong.’

Matthew, to tell the honest truth, thought she was; so he held his peace. He did not venture to inquire whether she had formed any fresh project on her brother’s behalf; still less could he think of proffering assistance. It was just as well that the colloquy was now broken off by the appearance of Mrs Frere, and before long he made his escape.

‘It is what I foresaw from the outset,’ his hostess remarked to her spouse later in the day ; ‘that foolish young man has been jilted already, and I must say that it serves him right.’

‘Eh?—jilted?’ echoed Dr Jennings, not ill-pleased at the supposed discomfiture of his ambitious rival. ‘Who told you that?’

‘There are things,’ replied the good lady oracularly, ‘which one doesn’t require to be told, if one has eyes in one’s head. He only came here because he was afraid it would create remark if he didn’t ; he scarcely spoke to anybody, and when I inquired, before he left, what news he had of Lady Sara Murray, he was downright sulky. Well, well ! I really can’t pity him ; he should have more common sense.’

CHAPTER IV

LILIAN MEETS AN OLD ACQUAINTANCE

WHATEVER assertions may be made to the contrary, there never yet lived the woman to whom admiration was unwelcome. They are so fond of saying this about themselves—or at least about one another—that it is safe to accept the accuracy of the statement upon such unimpeachable authority ; and indeed, *mutatis mutandis*, it applies to ourselves as much as to them. We all want to succeed, we all like applause ; the only difference between us and the ladies in that respect being that our opportunities of attaining pre-eminence are far more varied than theirs. Consequently, there was nothing surprising in Lilian Murray's gradual reconciliation to a notoriety which many of her compeers would have given ten years of life to share. She was probably the most beautiful girl in London, she was admitted to be the most beautiful in that small section of the community which is styled great by reason of its rank or riches, and everything leads the unprejudiced looker-on to believe that that position must be delightful and intoxicating while it lasts.

That it cannot, in the nature of things, last long was what Miss Murray's experienced relatives were never weary of impressing upon her. They added (in case she should not

know it) that the glory of being a reigning, unmarried beauty is not so much valuable for its own sake as for what it may be expected to bring, and when she told them that she was engaged to be married to a country doctor, they only laughed, affecting to treat so absurd a statement as a good joke. She began by telling everybody that her heart and her hand had already been disposed of; but after a time she ceased to thrust unasked-for information down the throats of the indifferent. If everybody likes to be admired, nobody likes to be laughed at, and it was perhaps sufficient to have perfect confidence in one's own immutability.

At all events, there was no treachery to Matthew in enjoying the whirl of gaiety and excitement into which she was plunged almost from the very beginning of her fashionable career. She might have retorted '*Tu l'as voulu, Georges Dandin,*' if he had displayed any epistolary uneasiness; but, on the contrary, he seemed not only contented but glad that she should see as much as possible of contemporary society. And she took to it all (notwithstanding the recalcitrancy exhibited in her earlier letters to her betrothed) as a duck takes to water. In a very short space of time she heard and saw a great deal; she soon picked up current phraseology, possibly also current notions of morality; there was not nearly as much difficulty about teaching her her lesson as there is about drawing out the hereditary instincts of a thoroughbred horse or a setter of high pedigree. It is true that she maintained certain mental reservations; but these she now knew how to keep to herself.

It was on a Sunday afternoon when the season was at

its height that she was taken to Tattersall's by some of those good-natured kinsmen and kinswomen of hers who were wont to relieve Lady Sara of the burden of chaperonage. On a Sunday afternoon at Tattersall's in the month of June one meets, if not quite everybody, at least a large proportion of the illustrious beings who are thus designated amongst themselves, and Miss Murray was speedily surrounded by the usual throng of smooth-shaven young men in long frock-coats. She was entirely at her ease with these gilded youths; her aversion for them, as a class, was a thing of the past, and although she snubbed some of them, she was amiable enough with others. The truth is that they were by no means disagreeable young men, while the remarks of some of their number with regard to horseflesh and racing were worthy of being listened to. Lilian, to be sure, was not specially interested in either subject; still she allowed herself to be conducted by a sporting peer in close proximity to the heels of a long string of hunters and, when he indicated their several blemishes, nodded her head confirmatively. Most of us can contrive to detect the obvious as soon as it has been clearly pointed out, and there is a distinct satisfaction in feeling that we know a little more than other people, to whom that advantage has been denied.

Lilian, therefore, was thinking to herself that, although it was very hot and there was a dense crowd and the stable was not quite as well ventilated as it might have been, she was better off, upon the whole, than if she had stayed at home or gone to church, when she suddenly became aware of a smartly-attired gentleman who was not only taking off his hat but

holding out his hand to her. Over the wrist which he was not holding out hung a slim umbrella with a large crook handle, and to this she pointed, as she returned his greeting, remarking with a smile :

‘Out of the sling, I see. I congratulate you.’

‘Oh, I threw away my sling ages ago,’ answered Leonard Jerome. ‘Thanks for your congratulations, all the same. Allow me, in return, to congratulate you very sincerely.’

‘Upon what?’

‘Well, I suppose I might congratulate you upon a heap of things—at any rate, the society papers tell me so—but only one of them is worth mentioning. Dear old Austin may be a lucky beggar, and I believe he is, but I’m bound to say that I think you are in luck too.’

‘I think I am,’ answered Lilian gravely.

She would have had some difficulty in explaining why Mr Jerome’s frankness of speech irritated her : perhaps it is never very pleasant to be called lucky ; perhaps also she doubted the honesty of his felicitations upon an engagement which everybody else had agreed to regard as a matter for condolence or ridicule. Instead, however, of manifesting her feelings, as she would have done a few months earlier, she passed on through the throng with Leonard Jerome, deserting her sporting nobleman, who was at that moment anxiously examining the bruised stifle of a weight-carrier.

‘I have seen you more than once from afar,’ Leonard resumed, ‘but you are rather unapproachable in these days.

Would it be permitted to a humble rustic acquaintance to call upon Lady Sara? She told me I might, you know.'

'We shall be charmed,' answered Lilian, furnishing him with her address, which he at once wrote down.

'And may I hope that you will be a little less savage with me now than you used to be when I was so constantly and so unfortunately in the way?'

'Was I savage? Well, I daresay you were rather in the way sometimes at Wilverton; but you won't be in anybody's way here; there isn't room. One doesn't notice the elbows of one neighbour in particular amongst such a host of elbows and neighbours.'

'I suppose not. And how do you like London, as compared with Wilverton? It's absurd to ask, though. London must be Paradise to a few privileged folks, and I presume it won't be very long before the sole attraction of Wilverton takes his ticket for the metropolis. Please, when you write to Austin, tell him from me that I'm looking out for him.'

'I am afraid even that inducement would not persuade him to leave his work,' answered Lilian, with the smiling, inattentive look which women are fond of putting on when they wish to annoy their male companions. 'He does not talk of coming up to London.'

'Then,' rejoined Leonard emphatically, 'all I can say is he is a duffer. He ought to be here.'

They were standing in the glazed central yard, and Miss Murray's brown eyes, which had been roving towards distant corners, were now slowly turned upon Mr Jerome, with an air of

disdainful interrogation. 'Do you mean to be impertinent?' they seemed to say. 'Possibly you do; but it is of no consequence. Your impertinence would be scarcely worth noticing.'

Relations might have become strained if Lilian's cousins had not just then hastened up to take her away to a tea-crush. After hesitating for a moment, she introduced him to them, and so took leave of him, without repeating the hand-shaking ceremony.

A few days later he called at the tiny house in Mayfair which Lady Sara had hired for the season, and was received with the prompt 'Not at 'ome' that might have been anticipated at five o'clock in the afternoon.

'Jerome?' said Lady Sara, when she picked up his card out of a number of others and scrutinised it through her glasses; 'is not that the young man who broke some of his bones down at Wilverton last winter?'

Her ladyship's memory, it will be perceived, could no longer retain the names of such insignificant persons as the heirs-presumptive of obscure country gentlemen, and in truth she had clean forgotten having ever contemplated Leonard Jerome as a potential son-in-law. She now dreamt, and was to all appearance justified in dreaming, of far more exalted connections.

Bitter disappointment was, however, in store for her. What was the use of having achieved a brilliant, an almost unprecedented, success if nothing was to come of it? And Lilian seemed determined that nothing should come of it. One of the saddest days of poor Lady Sara's life was that on which her daughter quietly informed her that she had just refused the

eldest son of a prodigiously wealthy contractor, whose virtues and riches had recently met with deserved recognition in the form of a peerage.

‘It is sheer, downright madness!’ the unhappy lady exclaimed. ‘This makes the fourth, and much the best, chance that you have thrown away. Anybody—anybody in England might have been proud and thankful to make such a match! Lilian, dear, what *can* you expect?’

‘I expect to marry the man of my choice some day,’ the girl responded composedly.

‘Oh, poor dear Mr Austin! Of course he is very nice and very good; but really—’

‘Really what?’

‘I hoped you had given up thinking of him, that was all. You haven’t spoken about him for such a long time.’

It was true that Lilian had given up speaking about the subject, because she knew that it was one upon which her mother’s sympathies could not be with her; but she had never wavered in her allegiance, nor did she for a moment distrust herself. Only she did, every now and then, wish that there were somebody to whom Matthew’s name might be mentioned without fear of ridicule. And perhaps it was because Mr Jerome was always willing, and even eager, to expatiate upon the manifold merits of his medical friend that she learnt to look with a pleasurable anticipation for the sight of Leonard’s handsome face.

The sight was seldom denied to her, after that preliminary encounter at Tattersall’s which had so nearly terminated in a

quarrel. Whether by accident or by design, Mr Jerome was at almost all the resorts of public and private amusement to which she was taken, and it soon became a matter of course that he should lose no time in making his way to her side.

‘You are a sort of safety-valve,’ she told him one evening, when he had taken the liberty of thanking her for her softened demeanour towards him; ‘I can say things to you which I am not allowed to say to anybody else in London. Besides, you dance beautifully.’

They frequently met at balls, and it was only natural that, having one important bond of union, they should proceed to discover others. Lilian’s early prejudice against the man who was now her favourite partner had quite disappeared; she began to feel a sincere interest in him and his affairs, about which he was always ready to discourse openly, and she acknowledged to herself that Matthew had not been far wrong in calling him manly and unaffected. For the rest, their intercourse was not uninterruptedly friendly. Leonard, in his jealous zeal for his absent friend, occasionally took the liberty of remonstrating with her upon what he was pleased to call her flirtations, and when he ventured to do this he was promptly sent to Coventry until he saw the error of his ways and came, with deep humility, to implore forgiveness.

‘I know I am officious and impertinent,’ he told her once, ‘but sometimes it is out of my power to hold my tongue. You have a way of looking at men—I daresay it means nothing—I’m sure it means nothing; but there are moments when—well, when I simply can’t stand it

He had to make his apologies a good deal more abject than that before they were accepted ; but the period of estrangement seldom lasted for more than forty-eight hours. The truth was that he had gradually become essential to Lilian's comfort, and, after all, since her conscience did not accuse her, why should she make such a fuss about a little vicarious jealousy? Leonard heard of some of the advantageous proposals which she had declined, and great was his joy on being made aware of them. He could not have displayed more satisfaction if he had been Matthew himself. Indeed, she often wondered whether Matthew would have displayed half as much.

Now, it came to pass, one fine afternoon in the beginning of July, that Lady Sara and her daughter drove to the mansions near Albert Gate where Mr Jerome rented a flat, having been invited by that gentleman to take tea with him and meet his sister, Lady Bannock. He had before this been several times admitted to the Murrays' little house in Tilney Street, where he had been made welcome by Lilian's mother, who had always thought him a pleasant sort of young man and was quite willing to be introduced to his bachelor abode and his influential relatives.

Lady Bannock was really influential, being the wife of a Scotch peer whose means were abundant and who was given to hospitality. She was a plump, good-natured little woman, without any vestige of her brother's comeliness of form and feature—which may have been one reason why her admiration and affection for her brother knew no bounds. Doubtless she

had been instructed to be particularly agreeable to her brother's friends; for she greeted the two ladies with effusion on their entrance, saying that she had heard so much about them from Leonard and had been wishing for a long time past to make their personal acquaintance. Lady Sara and she were soon deep in one of those conversations relating to common friends which are so engrossing to the persons concerned and so desperately uninteresting to everybody else. Lilian, meanwhile, took a leisurely survey of Mr Jerome's reception-room, which was lofty and sunny, which commanded a prospect of green trees and of the crowded park beyond them and which was furnished in admirable taste.

'You know how to make yourself comfortable, I see,' she remarked to her entertainer, when he brought her a cup of tea.

'Do you like these rooms?' he asked. 'Well, if one must needs live in London, I daresay one is as well off here as anywhere else, and I thought, upon the whole, I would rather make my home in a few small rooms amongst other civilised beings than shiver in one corner of a great empty house on the north-east coast. They only just hold me, though.'

'I should have thought you might have been contained in a smaller space than this; but perhaps you have large ideas. What do you consist of here?—drawing-room, dining-room, bedroom and bathroom?'

'Yes; and I have one small spare room and a smoking den.'

'What more can you possibly want? In our wretched little bandbox we are obliged to turn round with precaution,

lest we should break through the outer wall and tumble out into the street. Is it allowable to inspect your premises?’

Leonard made the only reply that could be made; but it struck her at once that he did not make it with much alacrity, and she said no more. After a time, however, he complied with her wish of his own accord, and conducted her into his dining-room, which was of ample dimensions and was rendered attractive by Chippendale chairs, a fine old oak sideboard and a few excellent etchings. When she had examined and expressed her approbation of these, he turned back into the corridor, and throwing open the door of a small room adjoining the drawing-room—

‘This is my private dog-kennel,’ he said, without entering. ‘There’s nothing to see in it.’

He could hardly have adopted a surer method of convincing her that there *was* something to see in it, and, being a woman, she was unable to resist the temptation of pushing past him.

A moment later she regretted her curiosity; for there, staring her in the face, was only too evidently the thing which he had not desired to exhibit to her—namely a full-length photograph of herself in a heavy silver frame. It stood upon the writing-table near the window, and was much too big and conspicuous to be ignored. Lilian pointed to it with her forefinger.

‘I don’t remember giving you that,’ she said quietly, yet in a voice which boded no good to the unlicensed proprietor. ‘Where did you get it?’

Leonard, who had become very red in the face, made a somewhat unsuccessful effort to recover his *aplomb*.

‘I got it from the photographer,’ he confessed; ‘please don’t kill him. He was most unwilling to part with it, and only yielded when I had recourse to subterfuges. In fact, I am afraid I left him with the impression that I was an authorised person.’

‘I see,’ said Lilian. ‘Well, as you are not an authorised person, and as you seem to have come into possession of this work of art by means of what you prettily call a subterfuge, it can hardly be considered your property.’

She picked up the frame, withdrew the photograph from it, and, tearing the latter across, put the pieces in her pocket.

‘You will have to find a substitute,’ she remarked. ‘There are plenty of actresses and other celebrities whose portraits you can purchase without any need for subterfuge or any breach of the law.’

He tried in vain to make his peace with her; he affirmed—truly or untruly, and in any case very ill-advisedly—that his intention had been to procure a likeness of Matthew, as a *pendant* to that of which he had been deprived, and he assured her, with equal clumsiness, that nobody, except herself and his man-servant, was aware of his indiscretion. The only reply that she vouchsafed to him was a contemptuous shrug of the shoulders, and her immediate return to the drawing-room robbed him of all opportunity for further allusion to the matter.

‘Lady Bannock is quite charming,’ Lady Sara remarked to her daughter on the way home. ‘She wants us to stay with them in Scotland towards the end of next month, and if she

repeats her invitation, I think we may as well accept it. We shall be in their neighbourhood, you know.'

'Shall we?' asked Lilian absently.

'Why, my dear child, have you forgotten that we have been asked to stay at three houses?'

'Oh, of course; but you said it would have to depend upon your health, and Scotland is so cold! Don't you think you would be better at Wilverton?'

'In August!' Lady Sara paused for a moment and then said emphatically,—'I hope and believe that there will never be any necessity for us to return to that place.'

Probably she expected some rejoinder, but she received none. Only Lilian, who knew that her will was stronger than her mother's, said to herself,—

'It may not be Wilverton, but it shall not be Lady Bannock's. I can answer for that!'

CHAPTER V

BANNOCK LODGE

TOWARDS the middle of July—which chanced, that year, to be a dull, rainy and oppressive month—Matthew began to be vaguely disquieted about Lilian. She no longer wrote to him with her former regularity; her letters, when they came, were shorter, far less circumstantial, and invariably opened with a sort of irritated apology for her remissness, which she did not ascribe, as she might have done, to stress of engagements, but to lack of any topics worth writing about.

‘It is always the same old story over and over again,’ she declared; ‘you must be as sick of hearing about these things as I am of doing them.’

To her meeting with Leonard Jerome she had made no allusion; and at this omission Matthew was a little surprised, because Leonard himself had made a point of writing to report the circumstance; but possibly that might be one of the incidents which Lilian deemed unworthy of special mention. It was, however, noticeable that from the date of its occurrence she became more and more imperative in her entreaties to her betrothed to come up to London, if only for a day or two.

‘I think you *ought* to come, and I think it is hardly fair

upon me that you don't,' she had written once, using, as it happened, almost the identical language employed by Leonard Jerome upon the same subject. But the coincidence—which indeed he regarded as a coincidence, pure and simple—neither suggested misgivings to Matthew's mind nor shook his resolution. He felt in honour bound to let Lady Sara have a free hand, and this was, in substance, the reply that he made to both his correspondents.

Nevertheless, on this moist, muggy, airless morning, as he stood by his dining-room window, with an open letter in his hand, and stared at the drenched geraniums and begonias and calceolarias, he was asking himself whether, after all, his duty was quite as clear as he had hitherto imagined it to be. Had he not, perhaps, been thinking rather too much about what he owed to the mother and hardly enough about what he owed to the daughter and to himself? He turned once more to the sheet of notepaper which he had already perused more often than was necessary in order to master its contents.

'For the last time,' Lilian wrote, 'will you come and see me? I suppose you must wish to see me, as you always say that you do, and unless you come soon, I can't tell when we shall meet again, or even'—here a few words were very carefully erased. 'At the end of this month,' she went on, 'we are going to stay with some people in Hampshire, and after that there will be visits upon visits until the winter, as far as I can see. If I could have had my way, we should have returned to Wilverton at the end of the season, but what can I do, now that all these invitations have been accepted? You think, no doubt, that you

are behaving chivalrously, and, in a way, I daresay you are, but you might remember sometimes that it is a little hard to have to do *all* the fighting.'

Possibly it was a little hard; possibly so—as indeed she seemed almost to hint—the fighting operations which she had to undertake were not directed solely against such feeble opponents as her mother and a family council. Only, in that case, she ought surely to be left to undertake them alone. If she was beginning to repent ever so slightly of her impetuous promises, if there was a shadow of doubt in her mind as to whether she had not made her choice too hastily, it would be ill done on his part to intervene or to bring any sort of pressure to bear upon her. This was Matthew's final conclusion, and he was all the more sure of its being a right conclusion because he would so gladly have decided otherwise.

'She will think,' said he to himself, 'that I don't care enough about her to come to her aid when I am called. So be it! I would a thousand times rather have her think that than lead her into doing what can never be undone, and what she may regret when it is too late.'

It was a relief to put these views, or something equivalent to them, into writing, to close the envelope, stamp it and despatch it to the post, beyond reach of recall. There are cases in which the real truth—*la vérité vraie*—must not be told: all one can hope for is that a truly sympathetic soul may contrive to read between the lines. There was at least this to be said, Matthew reflected, casting about him somewhat forlornly for stray scraps of consolation, that he had done Lilian no injury. If he had a

rival and was destined to have a supplanter, that happy man would, no doubt, be a rival and supplanter of the right sort. The danger which he had formerly dreaded on her behalf, the danger that she might, through indifference or ignorance, be induced to espouse some aged aristocrat or millionaire had, he felt sure, been conjured away. And it is one of those melancholy duties which fall to the share of a faithful historian to add that Mr Bush received an unusually sharp lecture that day. Bush considered such rebukes unmerited and uncalled-for, and did not hesitate to say so. He could not, he remarked, control the 'helements.' He likewise expressed a decided opinion to the effect that his master's health and temper, 'sim'lar to plants,' were suffering from abnormal atmospheric conditions, and he made so bold as to strongly advise a change of air.

It might be that Bush was in the right ; there was no need to be a physician in order to know that occasional holidays are requisite to keep mind and body in good condition, and Matthew began to think of a few weeks of Switzerland or the Tyrol. Change of air, change of scene, something that would induce a sort of false oblivion, something that would, at all events, help to make the time pass away—that was the prescription which he would have given to anybody else, and why should he not apply it to himself?

The Continent of Europe, however, was not fated to be trodden by his wandering feet that year ; for while he was still dallying with the idea of a foreign trip—and this half-hearted dalliance occupied his leisure for some little time—there came

to him a letter from Leonard Jerome which diverted the current of his plans and wishes into quite another channel.

‘My sister, Lady Bannock,’ Leonard wrote, ‘is awfully anxious to know you, and I am commissioned by her to say that, if you will excuse an unceremonious invitation and come to us in the Highlands about the last week in August, she will feel immensely honoured and flattered and all the rest of it. Do come, like a good chap, and give an old friend the satisfaction of seeing your face once more. You needn’t shoot unless you like, but I may tell you that it won’t matter a bit if you shoot badly. Bannock can’t hit a haystack at fifty yards, and I’m no great shakes, and we should as soon think of asking a crack shot to stay at Bannock Lodge as of publishing our record. So, if you have got a gun and a rifle, bring them with you, and if you haven’t, you can be supplied on arrival. All this won’t tempt you, I daresay; but I know what will. Lady Sara Murray and her daughter are going to join our small house-party some time between the 20th of August and the 1st of September, and unless I am much mistaken, one of them will be as pleased to see you as I shall be—which is saying a lot.’

Well, this heartily-proffered hospitality was very tempting, and acceptance of it seemed to be legitimate; because it had been pretty well understood from the first that Matthew’s period of banishment was to be conterminous with the close of the London season. After considering a while, he replied by a letter of warm thanks and conditional acquiescence, writing at the

same time to Lilian, who was now in Hampshire, to tell her of the project and state that he would be guided entirely by her wishes in the matter.

What Lilian would say he was by no means sure. Their correspondence, since his reluctant refusal to respond to her last appeal, had languished perceptibly ; she had made no disguise of the fact that she was hurt and disappointed ; she had gone so far as to declare that pretty language did not, in her opinion, atone for supineness, and it now seemed quite upon the cards that she might see fit to punish him by declining tardy reparation. But no such unhandsome revenge was, it appeared, contemplated by her. The return post brought Matthew a missive couched in much more affectionate terms than those which he had received of late, and in it Lilian proclaimed the delight with which she would now look forward to her visit to Bannock Lodge.

‘I was rather dreading it,’ she avowed, ‘because, as you are aware, I am not particularly devoted to your friend Mr Jerome, and I hardly know Lady Bannock ; but this makes all the difference ! I shall begin to count the days at once, and when you write to Mr Jerome, you may tell him from me that I am pleased with him. He evidently understands that his society is hardly an attractive bait enough in itself.’

Thus it came about that, on a windy, showery evening of late summer, the hero of this narrative reached the unpretending shooting-lodge in Ross-shire which was more often tenanted by Lord Bannock’s friends than by its owner. Matthew, who had had a long drive from the nearest railway-station, and who had been enjoying the keen, invigorating air, the flying shadows of

the clouds upon the hillsides and even the occasional down-pours of pelting rain, was glad, when his destination came in sight, to perceive that the building was not of a size to accommodate many guests. He had, in obedience to instructions, brought his gun with him (a rifle he did not possess), but he had by no means decided to use it, nor was he ambitious of making an exhibition of himself in the presence of a large number of spectators.

His hostess proved to be as simple and unpretentious as the establishment over which she was at that time presiding. She came out to the doorstep to welcome him and, after ascertaining that he was not in the least fatigued by his journey, said,—

‘You had better come and have some tea with me now ; Leonard and the others will be back before long. We are quite a small party, and for the present I have only one lady, Madame d’Aultran, who is out shooting with the men. I doubt whether they are blessing her, but she would go. Leonard tells me that you are not a very enthusiastic sportsman.’

‘I can’t call myself a sportsman at all,’ Matthew answered. ‘I don’t think I have had a gun in my hand more than twenty times since I was a boy, and as I never so much as saw a grouse upon its native heather, I must not venture to compete with your lady friend.’

‘Oh, you will have to shoot,’ Lady Bannock returned, laughing good-humouredly ; ‘there is absolutely no alternative. Even my husband shoots when he is here, much as he hates

it. My husband is a hunting-man, and just now he is a yachting-man, *faute de mieux*. He has gone off for a few weeks' cruise, leaving Leonard to do the honours, which is much the best arrangement. Leonard, as I daresay you have discovered, does everything well.'

'Except, perhaps, cycling?'

'Oh, poor fellow, yes. I never heard of anything more pathetic than his being driven to such extremities by his desire to behave dutifully to Uncle Richard, who, between ourselves, is a horrid old man. Still, the accident was not altogether to be deplored, since it was the means of bringing you and Leonard together.'

Lady Bannock was very friendly and chatty across her well-furnished tea-table. Presently, as was inevitable, she alluded to the approaching visit of Lady Sara Murray and her daughter; but she asked no questions, and Matthew's gratitude for her forbearance was enhanced by a suspicion that she felt some curiosity as to the precise state of his relations with her future guests.

'Leonard was very anxious that they should be asked,' she explained, 'and I shall be only too delighted to have them; because I presume they won't bring gun-cases, like Madame d'Aultran. Probably they will be contented to go up on the hill with me and the luncheon sometimes.'

'And I hope I may be allowed to form one of the party on those occasions,' Matthew said.

'Well, I don't know about that; you will have to do what Leonard tells you. I believe he has set his heart upon your

bringing down at least one stag, to exhibit as a trophy to Miss Murray.'

'As if there were the remotest chance of my ever being able to hit a stag!'

'You will if you get the chance. Stags are very big animals, and there is always plenty of time to aim. Lord Bannock declares that it is only the good shots that miss, and that they only miss through over-anxiety. He accounts for his own success by saying that the whole thing is such unqualified misery to him that he doesn't care a straw what happens when the critical moment comes. Leonard is much more keen; but then Leonard never does anything by halves.'

Assuredly there was nothing half-hearted about Leonard's welcome of his friend. He appeared, after a time, in his shooting-boots and knickerbockers and greeted the new arrival with almost boisterous effusiveness.

'We should have been home an hour ago,' he said, 'only that awful woman kept us back. She got dead-beat, as I knew she would, and wanted to sit down and take a nip out of somebody's flask at every hundred yards.'

'Can she shoot?' Lady Bannock inquired.

'Oh, yes, she can fire off any number of cartridges. She can't *hit* anything, except by accident. Mercifully, she didn't hit any of us. Well, it's all in the day's work, and there's no harm done. We're only a shooting-party *pour rire*, you know, Austin.'

'Leonard is so good-tempered!' Lady Bannock murmured explanatorily.

Indeed, it was evident that, in the opinion of this fond sister, Leonard possessed every virtue which can adorn a human character. He seemed, at least, to possess in a remarkable degree the virtue of hospitality; for nothing had been neglected to make Matthew comfortable, and when the latter went upstairs to dress for dinner, he found that various trifling predilections of his had been remembered and provided for. It is in this way, much more frequently than by substantial benefits conferred or sacrifices submitted to, that affection is won.

However, it was a genuine and substantial kindness to have asked a duffer to a Highland shooting-lodge at all, and so our hero felt, after he had descended to the low-pitched drawing-room and had been introduced to the four men who were his fellow-guests. These stalwart, sunburnt gentlemen did not convey to him the impression of being sportsmen *pour rire*, and would probably have been as much surprised as displeased to hear themselves described in such terms. They were polite, but he fancied that they scrutinised him with a certain apprehension, and he gathered from a few muttered remarks which he overheard that their patience had been sorely tried that day.

‘Well, they needn’t be alarmed,’ he thought. ‘Nothing shall persuade me to spoil their sport; and if the lady wants to go out to-morrow, I will go with her. Then, perhaps, they will recognise that I am a blessing in disguise.’

But the Vicomtesse d’Aultran, who presently entered, and whose brocade and diamonds looked a little out of

keeping with her close-cropped, artificially-curled blonde hair, her pince-nez and her would-be mannish carriage, lost no time in proclaiming to all and sundry whom it might concern that she had had enough of such sport as was obtainable in her present quarters.

‘This shooting over dogs is no fun at all,’ she asserted. ‘Why do you not have your birds driven, as they do in Yorkshire, where I was staying with Lord Towers last year? That was worth the trouble of going out for; but here—I am sure you will pardon me for saying so, dear Lady Bannock—I have been thinking all day what a wise man Lord Bannock is to *ficher le camp*! To-morrow I stay in bed until midday and read Pierre Loti’s last novel—*c’est positif*!’

She spoke English with ease and fluency. She was a plain-featured little woman, but her self-satisfaction was evidently undisturbed by any inkling of her physical disadvantages or any suspicion of the relief with which her statement was listened to by her audience. Her husband—so Leonard whispered to Matthew—was attached to the Belgian Legation, and she was considered to be capital company. It cannot, however, be said that Matthew, who found himself placed beside her at the dinner-table, felt disposed to subscribe to the general verdict in that respect.

‘I am enchanted to have met you,’ she was kind enough to tell him, after champagne had started a sufficient flow of general conversation to admit of asides; ‘I was dying to see the *fiancé* for whose sake the beautiful Miss Murray is said to have spurned more than one coronet.’

‘I trust,’ said Matthew, ‘that I come up to your expectations.’

‘Oh, my expectations are of little consequence; the important affair is that you should satisfy Miss Murray’s expectations after a period of separation so full of events and experiences for her. Do you not feel nervous?’

‘I doubt whether I should confess it if I did,’ Matthew replied. ‘Are you thinking of making a long stay in Scotland?’

But Madame d’Aultran was not to be diverted from her subject.

‘That depends,’ said she. ‘Lady Bannock is charming; but she comes here to rest after the fatigues of the season and she is quite happy to do nothing all day long. That is very well for persons of a certain age, but it is not my idea. I am one of those who demand perpetual amusement. Possibly you may provide me with some—you and your lovely *fiancée*—for I adore a romance.’

She proceeded, with a frankness which he could not sufficiently admire, to state her reason for hoping that this particular romance might not be unaccompanied by dramatic episodes. She had watched Miss Murray in London, she said, and was of opinion that volcanic fires lurked beneath that calm surface.

‘You may be her master,’ the outspoken lady concluded, ‘but it is certain that, if you are, you are not *le premier venu*. And have you no fear at all of any of these gentlemen? It seems to me that, under the circumstances, a little fear would not be out of place. However, we shall see.’

Before leaving the room, she gave Matthew a cigarette out of her silver case and, placing another between her own lips, bent over one of the candles to light it.

‘I shall never become accustomed to your barbarous practice of dismissing us as soon as dinner is over,’ she remarked.

But since nobody manifested the slightest desire to depart from established rules for her benefit, she had to follow her hostess ; after which the talk was of grouse and nothing else until bedtime.

It was at a comparatively early hour that the weary sportsmen, who naturally wished to keep their eyes clear, retired ; and Matthew, not feeling sleepy, had ensconced himself in an arm-chair with a book, before his bedroom fire, when a rap at the door was followed by the entrance of Leonard Jerome. Leonard had ostensibly come to insist upon it that his friend should not shirk the duties of the morrow, and he explained that the party would be divided, ‘so that you and I can go with old Standish, who is the best-natured fellow in the world and won’t criticise either of us.’ But the true purport of this nocturnal visit became apparent to a close observer when he inquired carelessly :

‘By the way, what was that horrid little Belgian woman saying to you about Miss Murray at dinner ? I could see by her face that she was talking about Miss Murray.’

‘Nothing libellous,’ answered Matthew, laughing ; ‘she only thought it kind to warn me that there might be rocks and shoals ahead. I suppose I did not strike her as presenting the appearance of a lover who could afford to risk rivalry with younger and more fascinating men.’

‘Impudent little wretch!’ exclaimed Leonard; ‘I hope you snubbed her as she deserved. She wouldn’t be here, I can assure you, if she hadn’t invited herself. She didn’t—er—caution you against anybody in particular, then?’

‘She mentioned nobody in particular. Is there anybody in particular whom she might have mentioned?’

‘To the best of my belief, not a soul,’ answered Leonard, with a certain eagerness. ‘It’s an open secret that Miss Murray has refused some good offers; but of course you know that. And I do hope, old man, that you’ll lose no time now in getting everything settled. As far as I can understand, Lady Sara won’t be obdurate, and—and surely this ordeal has lasted long enough!’

‘Perhaps it has,’ Matthew replied slowly. ‘Anyhow, you have given me an opportunity which might have been deferred indefinitely, but for you, and no friend could have done more’

‘I have tried to behave like your friend and—and hers,’ the other declared; ‘I suppose, as you say, nobody could do more for you than to bring you together.’

He fidgeted about the room for a few minutes, and then remarked: ‘Well, I’m off to bed, and you had better follow my example. You’ll be ready enough to turn in by this time to-morrow night, I expect.’

CHAPTER VI

MATTHEW'S TRIUMPH

SO, after all, you are not going to stay at home and pretend you don't know how to shoot, Mr Austin,' Lady Bannock remarked, glancing at Matthew's knickerbocker breeches, when he came down to breakfast the next morning.

'There's no pretence about the matter, I assure you,' he answered; 'but I have been ordered to go out, and all I hope for is that I may be ordered home again early in the day. If your brother would only believe me, it is no sort of pleasure to me to spoil other people's sport.'

'And if you would only believe me, you *can't* spoil anybody's sport at this game,' Leonard declared. 'You aren't being asked to take a part in a swagger battue, and you may miss every single bird that rises to you with a perfectly clear conscience. Not that you are a bit more likely to miss than I am.'

But not long after the tyro, accompanied by his friend and Colonel Standish, a wiry little man with a brown face and grizzled moustache, had set forth and had breasted one of the hills by which the house was surrounded, he began to suspect, for his comfort, that not too many chances of exhibiting his incapacity would be accorded to him. To right and left of him his companions got a shot apiece and killed their respective

birds neatly ; soon afterwards the same thing occurred again, with a similiar result, and Matthew was inwardly blessing them for their foresight and consideration in having placed him in the middle when a covey of six rose suddenly directly in front of him. This time he was bound to fire ; so he selected his bird and was even more astonished than relieved to see it stop and fall. Nobody said a word, which caused him some momentary disappointment ; but the fact was that the other two men were far too intent upon their work to waste time in paying him compliments. One of them might be what he had proclaimed himself, a bad shot (the other had not indulged in unnecessary self-depreciation), but certainly there was very little bad shooting that morning. Regard for truth compels Mr Austin's biographer to state that what little there was was provided by the hero of this narrative ; still he might have done a great deal worse, and perhaps it was rather wonderful that, with his total lack of practice, he did so well.

'I knew you were an old humbug,' Leonard said, when at length a halt was called ; 'at this rate, you'll be taking the shine out of us all next week.'

'Two brace and a half, I believe,' answered Matthew modestly ; 'but I am afraid it ought to have been four brace.'

'Oh, I don't know ; you seemed to me to take every chance you got, except perhaps one. Upon my word, we're in luck to-day, though ! I never expected to see so many birds, did you, Standish ?'

Colonel Standish smiled and said :

‘No, by Jove, I didn’t! If those other fellows want to beat us, they’ll have to look sharp.’

But he was evidently anxious to get on; and so, for the matter of that, was Matthew, who was already bitten with the sport-fever and was no longer in terror of committing some dire solecism. The task set before him was, after all, straightforward enough, and reminiscences of his boyhood enabled him to avoid glaring misbehaviour. Then, too, the air was exhilarating, the exercise was invigorating, it was a joy to watch the dogs working and, happily, when he missed, he missed. If it be cruel—and there is not much use in denying that it is cruel—to slay wild birds and beasts, the guilt involved in so doing is at least no greater than that of consenting to the daily slaughter of sheep and oxen. But it is not pleasant to cause torture through clumsiness; and that is why many a man ought never to raise a gun to his shoulder. Matthew, who, it must be owned, had had some reason to suspect himself of being such a man, was proportionately thankful when he was able to sit down upon the heather and partake of a well-earned luncheon without cause for self-reproach, save that his contribution to the bag might have been larger.

‘Oh, you’ll do,’ Colonel Standish interrupted his apologies by saying good-naturedly; ‘all you want is to get accustomed to the thing. I’d a good deal rather go out with our friend here than with Bannock, eh, Jerome?’

‘Rather!’ answered Leonard heartily. ‘As far as that goes, I haven’t a doubt that Austin would make me look small most days of the week. I happen to be rather on the spot to-day, for some reason or other.’

The fact is that both of these gentlemen were pretty well pleased with themselves, and were consequently disposed to be pleased with everybody and everything else. That they were somewhat less successful after luncheon than they had been earlier in the day was due in part to the fact that they did not meet with quite an equal measure of luck and partly to the heat of the sun, which made one of them lazy. Leonard Jerome, indeed, as Matthew had often had occasion to notice, was not a man who cared to stick to anything very long, and before four o'clock he was quite willing to leave Colonel Standish with the keeper.

'I'm sure you must have had more than enough of this, old chap,' he said to his other guest, 'and I daresay you'd like to stroll back and see what letters have come for you.'

No letters, it subsequently appeared, had arrived for Mr Austin; but Lady Bannock, who was discovered drinking tea placidly on the lawn, beneath the shade of a gigantic Japanese umbrella, informed him, after hearing of his prowess and offering her congratulations, that she had received one in the contents of which she presumed that he would be interested.

'The Murrays will be here to-morrow afternoon,' she said. 'I shall be almost as delighted as you will be to see them, for I really don't feel equal to undertaking Madame d'Aultran single-handed. What do you think she has just been doing, Leonard?'

'Who?—Madame d'Aultran?' asked Leonard, whose colour had faded on a sudden, and who did not seem to be quite himself. 'Oh, I don't know; something funny, no doubt.'

'Well, it was funny to look at, but I am not sure that she

found it as good fun as she had expected. She said she must positively be amused, and, as my company doesn't amuse her, nothing would do but that she must ride the Shetland pony. I warned her that he bucked and kicked; but she declared she could sit anything; so we had him out and managed to get a side saddle on his back, and Madame d'Aultran jumped into the saddle. Up went his heels, of course, and in about two seconds she was sent flying. I believe she is upstairs now, repairing damages; but the sound of your voices is sure to draw her out again.'

'Then let us on no account speak above a whisper!' exclaimed Matthew.

But that precautionary measure was taken too late, and it fell to his lot to entertain the vivacious little Belgian lady until the shooting party reappeared, Leonard having basely fled and Lady Bannock presently begging to be excused, on the plea that she had letters to write. Madame d'Aultran had bruised her knees and scratched her hands; but she confided to Matthew that such trifling inconveniences were a small price to pay for a few moments of excitement. She catechised him as to his first impressions of grouse-shooting and was good enough to say that she would perhaps go out with him on the ensuing day.

'Before evening, *grâce à Dieu!*' she added, 'we shall have your *fiancée* here, and then, I hope, there will be fun.'

Neither then nor later was she invited to explain herself; though she evidently wished to be questioned and seized every opportunity that offered to revert to the subject. Matthew was

not the man to discuss his *fiancée* with anybody, and if this vulgar and irrepressible woman succeeded in lowering his spirits, he was properly ashamed of having allowed her to do so.

But he did not sleep, that night, as well as he ought to have done after such a fine dose of fresh air and exercise; nor, alas! could he contrive to bring down a single grouse on the morrow. Madame d'Aultran, mercifully, had thought better of her fell intention and was not yet out of bed when he set forth with his companions of the previous day; yet, after a time, he almost wished that the Vicomtesse had joined the party. Her presence, he thought, would at least have been some excuse for the amazing lack of dexterity with which the keeper's lengthening face mutely reproached him. However, Leonard and Colonel Standish were as good-natured as possible and would not hear of letting him beat a retreat.

'You shall be released in plenty of time,' the former assured him, laughing; 'I give you my word that it isn't possible for any visitors, travelling by road or rail, to reach the house before four o'clock.'

Colonel Standish was even more explicit.

'Don't worry yourself,' the weather-beaten little soldier took occasion to say encouragingly to Matthew, while offering him a drain out of his flask; 'no man can shoot when he's worried. I know well enough what's the matter; bless you! I've been through it all myself ages ago. Yet, here I am still, a bachelor at eight-and-forty, you see, and I might be a precious sight worse off! This locket,' continued the colonel, tapping his watch-chain, 'contains a scrap of her hair; she is now a Mrs Something

Thomson and has I forget how many children. It wasn't for Thomson that she threw me over, though; there was another fellow before him, and my belief is that all women are tarred with pretty much the same brush. I don't say this to put you off, you know; only I mean—it doesn't signify quite as much as you think it does.'

He concluded with a friendly tap upon the younger man's shoulder and a laugh which sounded oddly pathetic and compassionate.

Did the kindly little man intend to convey a note of warning? It might be so; for he mixed a good deal in fashionable society and doubtless he had heard things. Well, the warning was not required. Matthew was prepared, and had been prepared all along, for any contingency that might arise: moreover, he had the consolation of knowing that in a very few hours he would be out of suspense. Nevertheless, he could by no means induce his hand and eye to work together, and eventually—to the keeper's undisguised relief—he gave up trying.

The afternoon was not very far advanced when he quitted the sportsmen and wandered slowly along the hillside towards Bannock Lodge. He was troubled, on his way, by sundry absurd doubts and misgivings. Would Lilian wish him to return in advance of the other men? Might she not prefer that their meeting should take place just before dinner? How would he meet her?—and in what manner would she expect him to greet her, if—as would probably be the case—her mother and Lady Bannock and Madame d'Aultran were present, as spectators of the scene?

But all these questions were delightfully answered and all these foolish doubts set at rest by the sudden apparition of a slight figure in a tweed dress and jacket and a waistcoat of the most approved pattern. Down dropped Matthew's gun upon the heather; he stretched out his arms involuntarily, and the next moment Lilian's head was upon his shoulder.

'They didn't want me to come out and meet you,' she said, after the interchange of certain more or less inarticulate speeches which there is no need to place on record, 'but I hoped that perhaps you would be walking back alone, and I was determined not to be confronted with you before them all. Well, are you glad to see me again, Mat? And, now that you do see me, what do you think of me? Have I improved or deteriorated?'

He was able to answer the first question in the affirmative without hesitation; as for the others, it was necessary to wait a little longer before making any replies which could be pronounced at once truthful and satisfactory. But so far as mere outward appearance went, she had certainly improved, and for the rest, she did not allow him much time to speak. She was voluble, she was excited, she had a hundred things to tell him and a hundred more to ask him about; there was no trace in her manner of that constraint which had, at one time, been painfully apparent in her correspondence. Every now and again she interrupted herself to say how thankful she was to be near him once more.

'It is a clear case of Providential interference!' she declared, 'and if we had only a patron-saint apiece—as, of course, we

ought to have—it would be our duty to supply them with any number of the best wax candles.’

‘I don’t know whether Jerome would care about wax candles,’ remarked Matthew; ‘but he has undoubtedly shown himself our patron on the present occasion. Perhaps he could hardly be described as a saint, though.’

‘He?—oh, no, he’s a distinct sinner. There was a St Jerome once upon a time, wasn’t there? He must have been very unlike his modern namesake. Of course you have a lot of other stupid sort of men staying in the house.’

‘Surely you don’t class Leonard Jerome among the stupid sort of men!’

‘Oh, well, it doesn’t matter whether he is stupid or clever, for he will be out shooting all day long, I hope and trust. *You* won’t want to shoot every day, will you? I suppose it will be acknowledged that we are privileged persons and that we may go off by ourselves—you and I.’

‘Is that at all likely to be acknowledged?’ Matthew asked.

‘It *must* be,’ answered the girl decisively. ‘Mamma admits now that the engagement must be formally announced. Don’t you understand that she couldn’t have come here unless she had made up her mind to the inevitable.’

‘She is still opposed to it, then.’

‘I don’t know. I think she is still rather surprised at my obstinacy; but she is as fond of you as ever, and at the bottom of her heart she is longing to see you again and tell you all about her rheumatism. Oh, Mat, if you could but realise what

a relief it is to have you on the spot! Do you know that, all this time, you have been behaving very much as if you didn't really want to marry me at all?'

The least he could do was to demonstrate that there was no shadow of foundation for that impression; and, in truth, the task was not a difficult one, although it proved somewhat protracted. And on his side, how could he doubt any longer that Lilian's love for him was genuine and permanent? It had stood the test of absence; it had withstood every temptation by which its stability could have been assailed, and although, like Lady Sara, he might—and indeed did—marvel at his own triumph, he was bound to accept, with due humility and gratitude, the fact that he had triumphed.

It was with humility, if not precisely with gratitude, that Lady Sara herself accepted that indisputable fact. She told him so before he had been five minutes in her bedroom, whither he was summoned immediately upon his return to the house, and long before he had concluded the medical examination which he was requested to institute.

'I believe I have done all that any mother could do,' she said—as though she owed Matthew some apology for her failure—'but Lilian is too self-willed for me. I can only let her have her own way now and trust that she may not live to repent.'

'You do not flatter me,' Matthew remarked, smiling.

'Oh, it isn't you; you are as good as gold, and I don't know why a reasonable woman shouldn't be perfectly happy with you. But Lilian isn't reasonable. I can't understand her, and I

suppose I shall never feel quite easy about her to my dying day. In many ways she reminds me of my poor sister, about whom you have heard, of course. However, we will hope for the best.'

'It seems to me that we are entitled to do that,' said Matthew. 'At any rate, if she is not happy with me, the fault shall not be mine. You have been very good to me, both of you.'

'You have been very good to us,' Lady Sara returned. 'It stands to reason that I should have preferred a different sort of alliance; but in all truth and sincerity, there is no man in England whom I should have preferred to you, personally.'

It was, therefore, as a formally engaged man that Matthew went downstairs shortly before the dinner-hour. He found his betrothed in the drawing-room with Leonard Jerome, who at once stepped forward to shake him by the hand and wish him joy. Lady Bannock was told; everybody in the house was told; and it must be confessed that everybody looked a little surprised.

'Small blame to them!' the bridegroom-elect reflected. 'It *is* a surprising thing, and I myself am quite as much surprised at it as they can be.'

He could have wished, however, that Leonard had been less noisily congratulatory and that, having proclaimed his friend's good fortune, he would have consented to let the subject drop. Something of this sort Matthew whispered to Lilian, who shrugged her bare shoulders and returned:

'Do you object? I don't. I suppose Mr Jerome wants to make us feel uncomfortable; but he hasn't succeeded with

me, and I hope you won't let him imagine that he has succeeded with you. As far as I am concerned, the whole world is welcome to know that I am going to marry the best man in the world.'

Upon the whole, that was a very happy evening for Matthew. It certainly was not spoilt for him by sundry ironical utterances of Madame d'Aultran's, nor did he so very much mind Leonard's pleasantries, although some of them struck him as being in rather bad taste. Yet, for some reason which eluded his mental grasp, there was a perplexing sense of unreality about it all. The oddest thing was that, when he bade Lady Sara good-night, she gripped his hand nervously, and he saw, to his astonishment, that there were tears in her eyes.

'I wish we had not come here!' she exclaimed, on a sudden. 'But I think Lilian is in earnest—oh, I am sure she *must* be in earnest! And you quite understand—don't you?—that the whole thing has been her doing. I have no hold over her nowadays—none whatsoever!'

Now, it was simply impossible to doubt that Lilian was in earnest. Matthew assured himself of that before he went to sleep, remembering also that women in Lady Sara's state of health are likely enough to become hysterical and fanciful under the influence of emotion.

'Perhaps I may not have been told quite everything that happened when they were in London,' was his final conclusion. 'Well, I don't want to be told everything; nobody but an arrant fool does. It is sufficient for me to know that she loves me still.'

CHAPTER VII

FRESH LAURELS

THE modern Anglican clerics who (without previous training or experience or any superabundance of mother-wit to guide them in their wielding of a dangerous weapon) have sought to revive auricular confession must, one would think, be led to form some queer conceptions respecting the depravity of human nature. Indeed, it is noticeable that this is what generally happens to them—with resultant blunders of a serio-comic kind. Upon the whole, it seems most prudent to rest satisfied with the exhaustive knowledge which we all possess of the thoughts and deeds of one human being (a most sympathetic and pardonable creature he or she always is,) and to avoid prying too closely into those of our neighbours.

‘I tell my husband everything,’ a lady once declared to the insignificant individual who had the honour to take her in to dinner. Whereupon he ejaculated, before he could stop himself, ‘Then thank God I am not your husband!’

It was partly because Matthew Austin was a gentleman and partly because he was no fool that he studiously abstained from questioning his betrothed as to every episode which had occurred during the period of their separation. There

had been something—that much he could see in the course of twenty-four hours—but he could not quite make out whether she wished to tell him about it or not, and, in any case, he was resolved to manifest no curiosity. What if she had hesitated for a moment?—what if she had met with somebody whom she might, under different circumstances, have cared for sufficiently to marry? Was it not precisely for that purpose that he had wished her to pass through a London season? And was not her fidelity to him infinitely more convincing and satisfactory now that it had been fairly tried?

He would indeed have been sceptical and exacting if he had not been convinced of her fidelity. During their long, solitary rambles, while the men were on the hill and the ladies more or less occupied indoors, she gave him clearly to understand that neither in London nor elsewhere had she met with his equal. She was affectionate; she was touchingly submissive; she asseverated, until he was ashamed of saying any more about it, that the monotonous existence of a country doctor's wife had no terrors for her; her one anxiety seemed to be to please him, and she implored him again and again to point out her faults to her, so that she might try to correct them. Yet, for all that, there had been something; perhaps there still was something. Every now and again she let fall an obscure hint, but, meeting with no encouragement, reverted to other topics.

‘Since you are so very eager to be convicted of sin,’ Matthew said to her laughingly, one afternoon, ‘I will mention a small matter in which I should like to see you change, and

that is in your behaviour to poor Jerome. I know you have never liked him; but is it necessary to treat him with such persistent incivility?’

‘Am I uncivil to him?’ asked the girl indifferently.

‘Well, I think you are, and I think he feels it. After all, we are considerably indebted to him—you and I—and it seems rather ungrateful and ungracious to take every opportunity of impressing upon him that you prefer his room to his company.’

‘I will endeavour to be grateful and gracious, then. How am I to begin? Shall I offer to join the guns, like that horrible little Belgian woman who is always making eyes at you?’

‘No, you might stop short of that; but perhaps it would have been kinder to go out with Lady Bannock and the luncheon to-day when he asked you. He was evidently disappointed.’

‘Poor fellow! And poor you, too; for I suppose I disappointed you into the bargain with my selfishness. Of course you must want to shoot; what else are you here for?’

Matthew assured her, with absolute sincerity, that that temptation would never have drawn him to the Highlands; but she shook her head.

‘I don’t believe a word of it,’ she returned; ‘you can’t possibly prefer wandering about all day long with me to shooting grouse. It would be against nature—against masculine nature, anyhow. No; we shall have the evenings together, and sometimes, perhaps, a bit of the afternoons, and always the middle of the day; for no luncheon-basket shall be complete without me henceforth. That ought to be enough; and so it is. I shall

have to put up with a smaller share of your company than that after we are married, I daresay.'

She did not seem to be at all offended ; but he was not altogether successful in persuading her that by consenting to take his gun out of its case once more, he was showing himself as unselfish as she was. For the rest, he really thought that they ought to display a little more consideration for their host and hostess. He had an uncomfortable feeling that he was making rather too much of a convenience of them both.

Lady Bannock, it may be presumed, cared very little how her guests might see fit to divert themselves, so long as they left her in peace ; but Leonard looked decidedly gratified when he was informed, the next morning, that Matthew would like to be allowed one more chance of missing easy shots and that Miss Murray proposed to accompany the servants and the provisions to the appointed halting-place at mid-day. In order that the two parties might foregather at a given place and hour, he at once cancelled certain arrangements which he had made, and probably Colonel Standish was alone in deploring the substitution of a sort of picnic for a hard day's sport. As for Matthew, he enjoyed the picnic all the more because, during the two hours or so which preceded it, he had been shooting very fairly well and had been deservedly complimented. Modest though he was, he was not sorry to be able to give a good account of himself to the ladies.

'It seems,' observed Madame d'Aultran who had decided to grace the occasion with her presence, 'that one can bring a

few grouse down when one likes. You have eclipsed Mr Jerome to-day—eh ?’

It had been no very hard matter to eclipse Mr Jerome, who complained of a headache and who begged to be excused shortly after parting company with his sister and her friends. Matthew would willingly have walked home with the deserter, but was restrained both by the protests of Colonel Standish and by an intimation that Leonard did not want him. He, therefore, remained out until the dinner hour was not far distant, acquitting himself so creditably that even the keeper bestowed a grim smile upon him, while his companion said :

‘You would make a fine shot, Mr Austin, if you cared to practise, and, by my way of thinking, it’s worth everybody’s while to cultivate his natural abilities. There are times, you know, when a man gets down on his luck ; but if there is any form of outdoor exercise at which he is tolerably good, he knows where to look for consolation.’

‘I hope I shall always have my work,’ Matthew answered, ‘and when I find that discouraging—as of course doctors often do—I shall have the joys of the domestic hearth to turn to.’

‘H’m !’ grunted the colonel ; ‘the joys of shooting are a certainty : the joys of the domestic hearth ain’t. Take my word for it, there’s no certainty about anything where women are concerned.’

As if to back up this *ex parte* assertion, Madame d’Aultran, who was seated beside Matthew at dinner that evening, must needs remark maliciously :

‘You Englishmen have droll ways of treating your wives and

daughters, not to speak of your *fiancées*. One would suppose that you thought women were to be trusted.'

'Perhaps we do think that Englishwomen are to be trusted, and perhaps we are right,' said Matthew.

Madame d'Aultran laughed stridently.

'And your Divorce Court, which is always busy?' she returned. '*Enfin!*—it is better to use one's eyes too soon than too late. If I were in your place, for example, I should take the liberty to ask Miss Murray what was the interesting subject which she and our handsome friend Mr Jerome were discussing this afternoon. It must have been very interesting, since they had to walk about together for more than two hours before they reached the end of it—if indeed they reached the end of it then.'

Matthew was not much more likely to put the suggested question than he was to be alarmed by Madame d'Aultran's impertinent warning; but later in the evening Lilian volunteered the information for which she had not been asked.

'I have made friends with Mr Jerome,' she said. 'We had a long walk this afternoon, and we talked about you the whole time.'

'That must have become a little monotonous, didn't it?' said Matthew, laughing.

'No,' answered Lilian with a slight smile; 'there were a good many things to be said. Plans to be formed for your amusement, too, lest you should find life in the Highlands a little monotonous. - By the way, do you know that you are to go out for your first stalk to-morrow?'

'I was not aware of it, and I can assure you that I don't intend to do anything of the sort.'

‘Oh, you will have to obey orders; all the arrangements have been made. Besides which, I want the antlers to decorate our entrance-hall at Wilverton. Can’t you see Mrs Jennings examining the head through her glasses and inquiring where we bought it? “Oh, that is one of the stags that my husband shot in Scotland last summer,” I shall say in an off-hand way. “He is rather fond of shooting when he has nothing better to do.”’

‘But, my dear child, it is in the last degree improbable that I shall kill a stag, even if I am given the chance; and I have heard that stalkers are not particularly fond of giving beginners a chance.’

‘Well, you will have to try, at all events, and Donald or Angus, or whatever his name may be, will certainly be forbidden to play tricks with you. Here comes Mr Jerome to tell you all about it.’

Leonard seemed to be really anxious that his friend should not quit Bannock Lodge without having had at least one day’s experience of deer-stalking, and as everything appeared to have been settled, Matthew could hardly refuse his assent to a scheme which, to tell the truth, was not wholly distasteful to him. ‘Madame d’Aultran will have no words to express her sense of my imprudence to-morrow evening,’ he thought, with some inward amusement.

Assuredly, no misgivings of the nature alluded to by Madame d’Aultran disturbed his mind when he seated himself, early the next morning, in the dog-cart which was waiting for him at the door and was driven off towards the glen where he was to put

himself in the hands of his guide. He had passed the age of irrational jealousy ; besides which, he happened to know for a fact that Lilian was somewhat irrationally prejudiced against Leonard Jerome. If they had now composed their differences, so much the better ; disloyalty was the last thing of which he could suspect either of them. On the other hand, he was beset by very serious misgivings as to his own ability to accomplish the task that lay before him that day, and the first thing that he said to Alick, the stalwart, brown-bearded individual who wished him good morning on his arrival at the trysting-place, was,—

‘Now, I want you to understand that I know nothing about this business—absolutely nothing at all ! I will try to do what you tell me ; more than that you mustn’t expect.’

‘Indeed, sir, it is not every gentleman that will do so much,’ answered the other with a quiet smile.

In spite, however, of this promising beginning, Matthew’s first act was one of insubordination ; for he resolutely declined to mount the rough little pony which one of the attendant gillies was leading. He thought it would be a good deal less tiring to scale the hillside on foot than to perch himself on that very uncomfortable-looking deer-saddle, and Alick did not insist. Only, to tell the truth, he had not bargained for quite so long or quite so precipitous a walk. The time for adopting precautions evidently had not yet come ; the deer, he gathered—for he did not like to ask too many questions, and not much information was vouchsafed to him—were still miles away ; progress, measured by the distance covered, seemed to be slow ; yet it was all he could do to keep pace with the easy strides of the

stalker and the gillie, who never turned a hair, and who, in truth, were taking things very easy, out of mercy to the uninitiated stranger. A sudden heavy shower which drenched Matthew to the skin scarcely added to his discomfort; a man in a Turkish bath has no objection to cold water. But all this (as, indeed, he had been previously warned) was nothing. There are acute miseries connected with deer-stalking; but a preliminary stroll uphill must not be accounted one of them. Even if he had thought of uttering a complaint, or of asking, as forlorn passengers are wont to ask the stewards of cross-Channel boats, whether this sort of thing was likely to last much longer, he could not have found the breath to do it. Onward and upward he plodded in patient silence, wondering sadly whether, when the decisive moment came, he would be able so much as to attempt aiming with such a shaking hand and clouded eye.

He had no need to feel anxious on that score; for many weary hours had to elapse before the approach of the decisive moment, and ample time to grow cool in person and in nerves was reserved for him. The reconnoitring process, when at length a post of vantage had been reached; the blurred vision of a remote herd at which he was bidden to gaze through the telescope; the consultation between Alick and the gillie; the interminable, circuitous tramp up hill and down dale; and then—ah! then—the excruciating crawl, first on his hands and knees and afterwards on the flat of his stomach, through a great, dismal swamp—these were experiences which, when Matthew subsequently looked back upon them, appeared to him to have spread themselves over a respectable slice of his lifetime.

However, by sedulously watching and imitating his pioneer, he at least avoided doing anything wrong, and his relief was greater than his excitement when at last Alick stealthily beckoned to him to draw near. Yet it must be confessed that it brought his heart into his mouth to discern six fine stags lying down on a grassy space beneath him and not a hundred yards off. He drew in his breath and held out his hand for the rifle. But Alick, to his surprise and disappointment, made a negative sign and began a noiseless retrograde movement. There would be no chance of a shot—so he was presently given to understand—until the deer got up and began to feed again; it was not yet one o'clock—Good heavens! not yet one o'clock!—and a further delay of an hour and a half, or perhaps two hours, must be submitted to.

That long wait was certainly the worst part of the entire ordeal. Little comfort was to be got out of a few saturated sandwiches and a short pull of raw whisky; smoking was impossible, and although Alick and the gillie exchanged some whispered remarks, Matthew did not dare to join in their conversation. Had he been a keen sportsman, he would doubtless have been miserable enough; but he was not particularly keen, and his misery was intensified by the conviction that all this tremendous outlay of skill, labour and perseverance would prove to have been utterly wasted. He was sorry for himself and sorry for Lilian, but chiefly he was sorry for poor Alick, whom he could never venture to look in the face again after the failure which he felt to be a foregone conclusion. All the greater, therefore, was the joy of ultimate success.

'I can't in the least tell you how it happened,' he said, giving as circumstantial an account of himself as he could to Lilian that evening ; 'all I know is that it was an easy broadside shot and that I was so paralysed by terror of missing that I obeyed instructions quite mechanically. He went like the wind for about eighty yards and then dropped, stone-dead. Alick thinks I might have got another, but he comforts me by saying that I was right not to fire unless I was pretty sure. Pretty sure indeed ! Well, at any rate, I am pretty sure of one thing now, and that is that deer-stalking is worth the trouble. Only it is too exciting for a sober old country doctor like me, and I am not going out again. At least, not until next time.'

As matters fell out, no 'next time' ever came, and that fine head remains Matthew Austin's unique trophy of the kind. But as long as he lives he is likely to preserve in all its freshness the recollection of his one day's stalking—of the moment when Alick handed him the rifle, silently indicating the stag at which he was to aim, of the unspeakable satisfaction with which he heard the thud of the bullet as it struck, of the well-earned pipe afterwards and of the long, triumphant march home through sweeping showers and flying gleams of sunshine. Upon certain other incidents of his visit to Bannock Lodge he has not cared to dwell with equal frequency, and these have consequently lost clearness of outline in his memory. Happily for us all, we are so constituted that we remember the good days of the past, while we begin to forget pain from the moment when it ceases to hurt us.

CHAPTER VIII

USQUE RECURRET

LILIAN spoke the truth (and it must be said for her that she almost invariably did speak the truth) in telling Matthew that he had been the chief subject of conversation between her and Leonard Jerome during that protracted colloquy which had excited the curiosity of Madame d'Aultran. But the subject had not been of her choosing, nor had she greatly enjoyed hearing her future husband's praises sung at such inordinate length and in a tone which seemed to imply that she might not be fully alive to the extent of her good fortune. She would have talked about something else, only that that had appeared quite the safest thing to talk about, and that, for various reasons, some of which were not very clearly defined, the question of safety had to be taken into consideration. At all events, she had no desire to revert to it on the ensuing day, and she learnt with some annoyance that Mr Jerome was still feeling too unwell to go out shooting with the other men. At luncheon Lady Bannock made a prodigious fuss over him, pressing him to eat certain delicacies which had been specially prepared with a view to tempt his palate and appealing to Miss Murray to say whether he was not looking wretchedly ill. As a matter of fact, he was looking rather pale, and Lilian, after a

hasty glance at him, unfeelingly suggested a couple of pills ; but, as he pointed out to her, it was impossible for him to carry out her prescription then and there, and, since he saw fit to hang about the house the whole afternoon, it proved equally impossible for her to avoid his society. They had a game of billiards together, during which she was absent-minded and taciturn, and then, towards evening, he proposed that they should walk up the glen and meet Matthew, who ought, he said, to be nearing home by that time.

Lilian replied, with a yawn, that she had no objection ; so they set forth, and before they had proceeded very far on their way he began, somewhat abruptly :

‘I have always wanted to explain to you about that photograph, Miss Murray. I can’t tell you how sorry I was to have given offence by what I really thought at the time was a harmless little indiscretion.’

Now, Lilian had repeatedly seen him and conversed with him since the occurrence of the episode alluded to, and she saw no reason why he should choose this particular moment to remind her of an indiscretion which she had neither forgotten nor entirely forgiven.

‘I don’t know what possible explanation you can give,’ she answered curtly, ‘and I haven’t the slightest curiosity to listen to one. It is generally considered bad form to buy a photograph of a girl with whom you are acquainted and exhibit it on your table, as if she had presented it to you, isn’t it?’

‘But I didn’t exhibit it,’ pleaded Leonard eagerly ; ‘I kept it in my own private den, where nobody could see it, except myself.’

It was upon the tip of Lilian's tongue to rejoin that he was not improving his case ; but she thought better of it, and only said impatiently :

'Oh, well ! it doesn't in the least signify now, one way or the other. If you want my photograph, I am sure you are very welcome to it, and I will look one out for you as soon as I go in. Which will be immediately,' she added, as a warning drop of rain fell on her cheek. 'I don't want to be soaked.'

Soaked, however, she was ; for she persisted in walking straight back to the house, notwithstanding his entreaties that she would take shelter under the lee of an overhanging rock until the shower should have passed.

'Is this necessary?' he exclaimed at length. 'You might keep comparatively dry and get rid of me, you know. I am perfectly willing to walk on by myself and meet Austin.'

'In your present precarious state of health !' she returned, with a short laugh. 'Oh, no ; you must come home and be taken care of. What would Lady Bannock say if you were to catch a cold in your head?'

He splashed along silently by her side for some little distance before he remarked, in a low, reproachful voice :

'I thought we had made friends.'

'Did you?' said Lilian ; 'I didn't.'

'But *why* not? What have I done? How can I help—well, I shall only make matters worse by saying more, I suppose ; but I do think you are rather unmerciful and rather—'

'Rather what?' asked Lilian, standing still and facing him fiercely.

‘I was going to say unwise ; but never mind ! I won’t say that. Only may I remind you that it was I who brought Austin here, and that I have done everything in my power to serve him and you ?’

This, at least, was undeniable, and she reflected with compunction that his charge of unwisdom was likewise scarcely open to refutation. It had been her fault, not his, that he had now practically avowed what both of them had known for a long time past. So she said :

‘Oh, very well ; we will call ourselves friends, then, if you like ; though I doubt whether we shall ever hit it off together very well. Of course it goes without saying that Matthew and I are much indebted to you.’

It was not in the best of tempers that she parted from him on the doorstep ; but she recovered herself before dinner-time, and she could not but acknowledge that his behaviour throughout the evening was exemplary. His contribution to the chorus of congratulation which greeted Matthew on the latter’s return had the appearance of being as sincere as it was hearty ; he had the good taste, too, to make no allusion, covert or otherwise, to the colloquy of which a part has been recorded above.

Nevertheless, there was now a secret—and a secret which must be kept—between her and Leonard Jerome. That was why she felt that it would be impossible for her to remain much longer at Bannock Lodge, and that was also one reason why the steady, persistent rain of the morrow filled her with despondency. Some of the men were leaving, that morning ; the others

proposed to shoot, notwithstanding the weather ; only Leonard, who was still unwell, was peremptorily forbidden by his sister to accompany them.

‘Whatever you do, don’t leave me!’ Lilian whispered to Matthew, while plans were being discussed after breakfast. ‘Selfish I may be, but I decline to face a second whole day of Mr Jerome. You must sacrifice yourself for once, and as soon as I can I shall get mamma out of this. It must be bad for her to be in such a cold, damp atmosphere. Indeed, she has begun to cough already.’

‘Oh, we shall have the sun out again before nightfall, I dare say,’ responded Matthew cheerfully. ‘Meanwhile, I ask for nothing better than to be allowed to stay in the house and try to amuse you. What would you like to do? Shall we have a game of billiards?’

Lilian assented ; and although it subsequently proved necessary to include Madame d’Aultran and Leonard in the game, she was not dissatisfied. After all, what was there to be so much afraid of? Matthew, for his part, was evidently afraid of nothing, and she endeavoured to admire, instead of being irritated with, his calm belief in everybody.

Madame d’Aultran, puffing out cigarette smoke and giving utterance to occasional witticisms of a *risqué* character, did most of the talking. She played a neat game and, with Leonard for her partner, easily defeated the other couple. Every now and then excursions were made into the hall to tap the falling barometer and gaze out at the unbroken, leaden sky ; once or twice Lady Bannock looked in to see how her guests were getting on

and to assure them audaciously that it never rained for twelve consecutive hours in the Highlands. But the time dragged on very slowly, and Lilian was beginning to wonder how on earth the afternoon was to be disposed of, when a servant came in with some message for Matthew, who at once laid down his cue and left the room. As he had not returned at the end of five minutes, Madame d'Aultran shrugged her shoulders and remarked :

‘It is not ceremonious ; but the charm of your English country life is its absence of ceremony. What is certain is that three people cannot play billiards together—perhaps even cannot talk together with the freedom that two of them would prefer. *Allons ! je me sauve. Amusez-vous bien mes enfans, et tâchez d’être sages !*’

The horrid little woman disappeared through the doorway, with a parting grin, and for a moment Lilian thought of following her. But it seemed a little ridiculous to do that. From whom or from what was there any need for her to run away ? So she stood her ground and said coolly :

‘Shall we begin another game ? We can stop when Matthew comes back.’

Instead of making the reply that might have been expected of him, Leonard walked the whole length of the room and back again in silence. Then, halting in front of her, and looking straight into her eyes, he exclaimed abruptly,—

‘Are you *sure* ?’

‘I don’t know what you mean,’ faltered Lilian.

‘Yes ; you know what I mean. Perhaps I ought not to say it ; perhaps it is treacherous to say it—although Heaven

knows I have been loyal enough up to now ! Anyhow I can't help myself—I must ask you the question ! Are you sure that you really love Austin ? Are you sure that you have ever really loved him at all ?'

When, as sometimes happens, ordinary intercourse is stripped on a sudden of ordinary conventional restrictions, we are all apt to become amazingly honest. This, of course, is not because we have any wish to be so, but simply by reason of our inability to adapt ourselves at a moment's notice to novel and unforeseen conditions. Lilian completely lost her presence of mind and answered :

'If I were not sure, you are the very last person in the world to whom I should confess it.'

'Ah, then it is as I thought !' he cried. 'You don't love him ; you only like and admire him—as indeed I do too, for the matter of that. But it isn't enough to like and admire your husband, at least, it can never be enough for *you*, and I am sure in your heart you feel that.'

Lilian, who had sunk down upon one of the long leather benches which surrounded the room, stared at him affrightedly. She seemed to have no answer to make ; so he went on, with the more confidence :

'I am not ashamed of speaking like this—'

'You ought to be !' she interjected quickly.

'No ; I should be ashamed of keeping silence. Ought I to let you wreck your whole life for an idea ? I was going to say that I shouldn't have ventured to speak as I am doing if you hadn't betrayed yourself a dozen times in the course

of the last two days. You may have deceived others, you may even, for aught I know, have deceived yourself; but it isn't in your power to deceive a man who—well, it can do no harm to tell you what you know already—who loves you as passionately as I do.'

Lilian rose to her feet, not without an effort, and faced him unflinchingly.

'So this is what your friendship is worth,' said she; 'this is what you boasted of and expected to be thanked for! I suppose it never occurred to you that I would rather have died than come here if I had imagined for one moment that your only object was to put such an insult upon me.'

'Ah, but I think you must be very well aware that that was not my object,' he returned quietly. 'What had I to gain by insulting you, whom I love with all my heart and soul? When I asked my sister to invite you here and to invite Austin at the same time, I had no other wish than the very natural one to be put out of my pain as soon as possible. Shall I tell you the whole truth? I was convinced that you loved him, but I was not at all convinced that he loved you. I thought—and indeed I think still—that he was fond of you in a sort of elder-brotherly way; I knew he would make the best of husbands; but I was sure that, partly out of chivalry and partly out of indifference, he would never attempt to force himself upon you, against your mother's wish. And I wanted you to have what would make you happy. It seems to me that that is a sufficient excuse for what I did.'

Lilian's face had flushed and paled alternately during this speech. She now said :

'You are not excusing yourself for what you have done, but for what you say that you meant to do. Oh, why could you not leave us alone !'

'I have told you,' he answered. 'I soon saw what the truth was, and that changed everything. I give you my word of honour that I would have held my tongue up to the end if I could have gone on believing that the love was on your side ; but—'

'Oh, your honour !'

'Yes, my honour. I don't admit that I have acted dishonourably, though I know it will be said that I have. Austin is my friend ; but when it comes to be a question between Austin and you, he must go to the wall. I go further than that ; I believe I am doing him an actual service by preventing you from marrying him on false pretences.'

Lilian broke out into a hysterical laugh.

'You are very fortunate to be able to think so well of yourself,' said she ; 'I wish you could give me your recipe ! But you certainly go very far indeed when you take it for granted that you have prevented me from marrying the man to whom I am engaged. It is ingenious of you to suggest that he never cared for me ; only I am not bound to believe that you are speaking the truth.'

'I didn't say that he had never cared for you ; I said he had never really been in love with you. But that is nothing. What goes to the root of the whole matter is that you are not in love with him. Can you tell me that you are ?'

Well, she tried to tell that falsehood—a falsehood which

had been dear to her, which she had cherished, in spite of all, and which she had never until now admitted to be a falsehood—but her eyes dropped and the words refused to pass her lips. All she could say was, ‘What right have you to cross-examine me?’

He caught her by both hands and, bending forward, murmured a few passionate words which explained what, in his opinion, constituted his right. Perhaps it was a right; perhaps it must be acknowledged to be a right; perhaps two unmarried people who love one another ought not to allow anything or anyone to come between them. Yet it may be hoped that the majority of men would not have accepted Leonard Jerome’s position as light-heartedly as he did.

‘Don’t be so troubled about it,’ he said, five minutes later; ‘it isn’t nearly such a tragic business as you suppose. There will be a bad quarter of an hour for both of us; but that is a small price to pay for thirty or forty years of happiness, instead of misery.’

‘Oh, you won’t love me for thirty or forty years,’ Lilian returned, shaking her head sorrowfully; ‘if it is thirty or forty months of happiness that I am buying, that is the very outside. Besides, it isn’t of myself, or of you either, that I am thinking.’

‘Well, you will see that Austin will take it coolly enough. It may be a shock to him, and I daresay it will; but I doubt whether he understands what love means. One feels like a brute; one can’t help it—and yet all the time one knows that one isn’t hurting him much.’

‘He does care for me,’ said Lilian.

‘Yes; but not as *I* care for you—not as you wished to be cared for.’

That might be true, and, if so, it was her one excuse. She said as much, adding :

‘I think he is too good for me ; I think I could have gone on loving him—because I did love him at first—if he hadn’t always made me feel that he was such a long way above me. That objection doesn’t apply to you,’ she concluded, with a faint smile.

‘Oh, I’m not Matthew Austin,’ Leonard confessed readily ; ‘still I don’t know that I am much worse than my neighbours. It is true that you have always treated me with apparent hatred and contempt ; but wasn’t that only because—’

‘Don’t!’ she exclaimed, laying her finger on his lips ; ‘you make me feel as if I had been acting a part which anybody could have seen through. But it was not pretence ; I really thought that I disliked and despised you. Even now I can’t quite understand why you suspected what I never admitted to myself.’

Leonard laughed.

‘When one honestly despises a man, one doesn’t take the trouble to keep on telling him so,’ he answered. ‘All the same, I felt nothing approaching to certainty until yesterday, nor any sort of hope that I should ever be as happy as I am now until a few minutes ago.’

‘You have no business to be happy,’ Lilian began. ‘I almost wish—’

But she started away from his side, without ending her sentence ; for at this juncture the door was opened, and Matthew Austin walked in.

CHAPTER IX

TWO METHODS OF TREATING THE SITUATION

IF Leonard and Lilian had looked half as guilty as they felt, or even half as guilty as they thought they were looking, explanations would have been entirely superfluous; but, as a matter of fact, they only looked rather uncomfortable, and the intruder, glancing from the one to the other with an amused smile, suspected nothing more than that they had been quarrelling, as usual.

‘I must apologise for having broken up our game so uncere-
moniously,’ said he, as he advanced towards the window where they were standing; ‘I thought I should only be away for a minute or two. Lady Sara merely sent to say that she wanted to speak to me, and I didn’t gather from her message that anything was the matter.’

‘Is anything the matter? Has she been taken ill?’ asked Lilian, making for the door at once.

Her own voice sounded most peculiar and unnatural to her; but Matthew either noticed nothing odd about it or mistook the nature of her emotion. He stretched out his arm to bar her exit and laughed.

‘Don’t be alarmed,’ said he; ‘it is all right. I was afraid at first that there was a threatening of bronchitis, but I am

quite satisfied now that a slight cold is the extent of the mischief. As a measure of extra precaution, I have sentenced your mother to twenty-four hours of imprisonment in one room, and I should have been downstairs again long before this, only we began talking, so that the time slipped away. What have you done with Madame d'Aultran? I am afraid she won't be best pleased with me for having deserted her in that cavalier manner.'

'I—I think you will find her in the drawing-room. Or if she isn't there, perhaps she will be—somewhere else,' answered Lilian desperately; for indeed the girl hardly knew what she was saying, and her one wish at the moment was to get away and hide herself.

'Oh, my anxiety to make my peace with Madame d'Aultran is not so keen as all that,' said Matthew; 'I would rather be allowed to stay where I am for the present, if I am not *de trop*.'

'Not at all,' answered Lilian—and then was so struck by the absurd ineptitude of the reply that she broke into an abrupt fit of laughter.

Matthew looked a little puzzled; Leonard, who had taken up a cue and was knocking the balls about, paused to stare at her across the billiard-table in mingled amazement and apprehension. She felt that she could endure this no longer and that her sole chance of saving the situation lay in precipitate flight. Murmuring something about her mother, therefore, she turned, and was out of the room before another word could be said. The unsuspecting Matthew thought it necessary to offer excuses on her behalf.

‘Lilian isn’t quite herself,’ he remarked. ‘She has had a good deal to try her during the last few days, you know, and of course—as Lady Sara was saying to me just now—I am not the husband whom her friends would have selected for her. Women, I fancy, feel the disdain and compassion of their female friends a great deal more than we should. That sort of thing gets on their nerves and irritates them, however determined they may be to disregard it.’

‘I daresay it does,’ agreed Leonard absently.

He was driving a ball round the billiard-table and was apparently intent upon making it strike as many cushions as he could; but in reality he was not conscious of any such effort. What he was thinking to himself was that if the payment of a hundred pounds, or even five hundred, could make him just half an hour older, he would write an I.O.U. for the amount then and there, without wincing. It had been all very well to assure Lilian that the business was not a tragic one, but now that he was face to face with it, he did not like it in the least. If Austin would only make things a little easier for a fellow by asking one of the questions which might so naturally have been asked, under the circumstances! But Matthew, with no inkling of what was required of him, was proceeding innocently:

‘Yes, it makes them irritable; and then the person nearest at hand is apt to suffer. I want you to be friends, you two, and I am sure you will be friends by-and-by; only for the present there are certain obstacles. You see, my dear Jerome, the fact is that it isn’t altogether easy for a beautiful girl to treat a good-

looking young bachelor like you as a friend. Her experience is that all young men want to make love to her, and even if she knows that it is not so in a particular instance, she can't help knowing what other people are likely to think and say about it. For the matter of that,' added Matthew, laughing, 'I don't mind telling you that Madame d'Aultran has been kind enough to caution me repeatedly against leaving you and Lilian together.'

Leonard laid down his cue, straightened his back and returned curtly:

'Madame d'Aultran is no fool!'

'There are fools and fools. I take the liberty of calling her a fool for not having discovered that I can trust you as implicitly as I would trust myself; but as to the general principle she is probably right, and Lilian may feel that. What I mean is that Lilian can't be quite at her ease with you yet; so if she has been snubbing you, and if you and she have had a little tiff in consequence—'

'Oh, man alive!' groaned Leonard, 'there has been no little tiff. *Can't* you understand?—have you really and truly seen nothing all this time?'

Matthew's face became grave. He laid his hand gently upon the other's shoulder and said:

'Perhaps I haven't been quite as blind as you think. Long ago, at Wilverton, I fancied that you were rather smitten; I told you so, you know, and you almost admitted it. But you gave me to understand that that kind of malady wasn't incurable with you—and then you went away. Ever since, you have seemed anxious

—unnaturally anxious, I daresay—to make my path smooth for me. I ought to have understood the meaning of that unnatural anxiety; most likely I should have understood it if I had been a spectator, instead of an actor; the only excuse for my density is that there was no very obvious reason why, if you loved Lilian, you should not have paid your addresses to her, as others did. I am afraid the reason must have been that you were my friend and that you were determined not to be a false friend.’

‘Yes, that was it—upon my honour, that was it!’ responded Leonard eagerly. ‘And after all,’ he added, with a mournful change of intonation, ‘I *have* been a false friend. I don’t suppose you will ever forgive me.’

‘My dear fellow, if you have said something which it would have been better not to say, I forgive you with all my heart,’ Matthew declared. ‘And I am most truly sorry for this. What can I say?’ he added, throwing his arms apart, with a gesture of deprecation which was almost comic. ‘It is a standing marvel to me that Lilian should have chosen me rather than you, or somebody like you; but since she has chosen me—since she does love me—’

‘But she doesn’t!’ interrupted Leonard.

It was a brutal method of opening his friend’s eyes; yet the thing evidently could not be accomplished without brutality, and this dialogue at cross-purposes was growing intolerable.

‘Believe me or not, as you like,’ he went on, ‘I wouldn’t have raised a finger to prevent your marriage unless I had seen as plainly as I see you now that she was deceiving you. From the very best motives, of course; still, the fact remained that

she was deceiving you. For a long time I firmly believed that she cared for you—there would have been nothing in the least extraordinary in it if she had—but of late it has been different. The true state of the case couldn't be ignored any longer.'

Matthew's grey eyes sometimes assumed a singularly intent, searching expression. At such moments they darkened in colour and could not be met without a sensation of discomfort. Leonard's fell before them, as he said :

'I know you must hate me—I hate myself for hurting you like this ! But it was inevitable.'

'I think,' rejoined Matthew quietly, 'that you are mistaken. That is, if you are under the impression that Lilian not only does not love me, but that she loves you.'

'There cannot be any mistake about the matter ; I have her own word for it that she loves me, and if you will ask her—but I don't want you to go to her in hot blood. See here, Austin ; we have both treated you abominably, and we are heartily ashamed of ourselves ; but in a sort of way we have been the victims of circumstances, just as you have. I don't ask to be forgiven—that would be asking rather too much—only I do beg of you to spare Lilian until you have had a few hours to think it all over in.'

'Do I strike you as behaving like a man in hot blood ?' asked Matthew, with just a touch of scorn. 'And don't you think that, if I wished to vent my wrath upon somebody, I should prefer attacking you to attacking a woman ? Indeed, that would be all the more easy because, although I cannot

profess to understand her, I believe I thoroughly understand you now.'

Those were the sole words of reproach that he addressed to his friend and supplanter from first to last. He listened patiently to Leonard's explanatory narrative; he submitted, much more in compassion than in anger, to the latter's protestations of remorse and somewhat lame efforts at self-justification; he bore even to be assured that his own love for Lilian Murray had been a sheer illusion, at the memory of which he would soon learn to smile. He did, in truth, thoroughly understand his interlocutor, and recognised that Leonard Jerome, being what he was, could scarcely have acted or spoken otherwise than as he had done. The manner in which the conversation was wound up was highly characteristic of both men.

'Well, that's a great weight off my mind!' Leonard exclaimed. 'I never funk'd anything so much in my life; but it hasn't been half as bad as I expected, and you're awfully good about it. It's jolly to think that I may still call you my friend; for, when all's said and done, you are the very best friend I have in the world, Austin.'

'I shouldn't wonder if I was,' Matthew answered, holding out his hand and smiling. 'Anyhow, this long misunderstanding, which has come to an end at last, shall cause no breach between us.'

But if it was easy to understand Leonard and not very difficult to make excuses for him, Lilian's case stood upon quite another footing. Generous though Matthew was, and had proved himself to be, he could find no extenuating circumstance

for her amongst those of which she was said to have been the victim. For what object or reason, he wondered, as he left the billiard-room with an aching heart, had she been guilty of such deliberate and sustained duplicity? Inconstancy would have been a little thing—he had never demanded of her that she should remain faithful to a pledge by which she had bound herself against his express wish, nor would he have had any right to feel aggrieved, had she claimed her release from it. But that she should have said what she had said and done what she had done, loving another man the whole time—this it was that he could neither comprehend nor condone. Frankly, there is something revolting in such behaviour, and no lover, however versed he may be in the intricate and contradictory workings of human nature, can be expected to palliate it.

Of that Lilian was only too well aware. She might, had she been less straightforward, or had she taken a less uncompromising view of her own moral degradation, have made out a case for herself; she might, indeed, by telling the simple truth, have conciliated the man whose confidence she had betrayed and who was large-minded enough to pardon any truth-telling fellow-sinner; but it did not seem to her worth while to attempt anything of the kind. She belonged, as it happened, to that somewhat scarce class of mortals who are either good or bad, their temperament forbidding them to detect the comfortable *via media* which renders existence more or less pleasant for the generality of us. Consequently, she had nothing to say to Matthew that did not constitute an aggravation of her offence.

Her non-appearance at the luncheon hour created no remark. Madame d'Aultran, to be sure, seemed to smell a rat and threw out some broad hints; but neither Leonard nor Matthew suffered themselves to be disconcerted by these, and immediately after rising from the table, the latter went upstairs, saying that he must see how his patient was getting on. He found his patient cheerful and in evident ignorance of the events of the morning. Lilian, who was seated beside her, looked rather paler than usual, but exhibited no agitation and took her share in the conversation that followed with a composure which Matthew would have admired if it had not disgusted him. He avoided addressing her directly—in fact, he could not bring himself to do so—until the time came for him to retire, when he turned to her and said :

‘May I speak to you for a minute?’

She got up at once and followed him out on to the landing at the top of the staircase. From the hall below arose the shrill voice of Madame d'Aultran, who, as could be gathered from her ejaculations, was throwing cherries at Leonard Jerome and making him catch them in his mouth.

‘Is this sufficiently private,’ asked Lilian, ‘or shall I get a hat and a waterproof and go out of doors with you? I don’t mind getting my feet wet.’

‘There is no need for that, thank you,’ answered Matthew coldly. ‘Something must be said; but I suppose the sooner it is over the better you will be pleased.’

She nodded and waited calmly for him to continue.

That, after all, was not the easiest thing in the world to do,

and a few seconds of silence supervened, during which he tried to collect his ideas and imitate her calmness.

‘Of course,’ he began at length, ‘you are released from your engagement to me.’

‘That,’ she remarked, ‘goes without saying. I never yet heard of a man who wished to keep up his engagement after he had been thrown over, and I don’t quite see how he could do it, even if he had such an extraordinary wish.’

‘I am sorry that I expressed myself so ridiculously; the situation is rather novel and rather sudden, you see. I suppose what I meant to say was that, so far as I am concerned, you will have no further trouble.’

‘I didn’t expect any,’ answered Lilian. ‘You are well rid of me, and you know it. Is there any use in my begging your pardon? I will, if you choose; only I can’t imagine that you would care about apologies. Nothing can alter the facts.’

Matthew dropped his elbows upon the balustrade and looked down the staircase without replying. Piercing shrieks of laughter ascended from beneath him, where Madame d’Aultran had apparently grown weary of the cherry game and was now chasing her victim round and round the hall. Presently the slamming of the front door was followed by silence. It was to be presumed that Leonard had preferred the fury of the elements to the refined pleasantries of the Vicomtesse. Lilian advanced a few steps and tapped her discarded lover somewhat sharply upon the shoulder.

‘Don’t look so woebegone,’ she said; ‘you must know as well as I do that you have no cause for lamentation. You have

found me out. Well, that isn't pleasant ; but it would have been a good deal more unpleasant to find me out after you had married me, wouldn't it? You ought to be thanking Heaven for your good fortune—and so you will be very soon.'

He turned a haggard and frowning countenance upon her.

'I can't believe that it is you who are speaking to me, Lilian,' he exclaimed. 'Why have you misled me so completely? What was the good of it?—where was the need for it? I don't recognise you.'

'How should you, when I don't recognise myself?' she retorted, with a short laugh. 'No, I won't say that! This is my real self; the other wasn't. I am sure mamma will tell you—she is fond enough of telling me—that we are a bad lot and that we can't escape from the taint of our race. You can put it in that way, if you find me too puzzling. But after all, what does it signify?'

'Not very much, perhaps,' answered Matthew, after a pause, 'so long as you are quite certain that you love Jerome.'

'I suppose I must have been quite certain of that some time ago, though I didn't acknowledge it, and I tried to do what seemed to be my duty. If you had come to me in London when I begged you to come—but we won't go back to that old story. One thing at least I am quite certain of now, and that is that you are to be congratulated.' As he made no response, she resumed presently: 'What will you do? You won't stay on here, I presume.'

'Oh, no,' he answered, 'I shall make some excuse for leaving to-morrow morning. Perhaps it would be less embarrassing

both for you and for me if nothing were said about all this until after my departure.'

'Just as you like.'

'Thank you: then I should like to be unexpectedly called away. And now, just one word more. I have told Jerome that there shall be no breach between us and that we shall be friends in the future as we have been in the past. I don't know whether I may venture to say as much to you?'

'I don't see how you can. You are well rid of me; but if you were an angel from Heaven, that wouldn't prevent you from despising me. It is downright nonsense to talk about our remaining friends.'

'Well, I shall be your husband's friend, at any rate, and we are sure to meet after your marriage, because Mr Litton will want you to stay at Wilverton Grange sometimes. I think it would be better for everybody concerned that we should meet upon friendly terms.'

'Oh, of course!—I didn't quite understand what you meant. By all means, let us behave civilly to one another. Is that all?'

'I believe that is all,' answered Matthew, turning to descend the stairs. But on the first step he halted and retraced his steps. 'Lilian,' he said, 'do you know that you have been talking to me all this time as if I were in the wrong? Will you tell me whether I have done anything to hurt or offend you?'

'Oh, I don't know!' she returned impatiently. 'Don't call me Lilian again, please; I am Miss Murray now, and you are Mr Austin. No, you haven't offended me; once or twice you

might have been a little more sympathetic—but it's lucky that you weren't. I am glad that you are not much hurt and only as much offended as you couldn't help being. Now go—go and marry Miss Frere, and be happy ever afterwards !'

The sound of her forced and mocking laughter pursued him down to the hall, where he found a batch of letters awaiting him. It was a simple matter to seek out Lady Bannock, holding these in his hand, and to tell her that he found himself, much to his regret, compelled to leave Scotland early on the morrow ; but to baffle the curiosity and the shrewd suspicions of Madame d'Aultran proved a somewhat harder task.

'I have a great mind to travel south with you,' the horrible little woman said, when he wished her good-night, after having been goaded almost to the point of insulting her throughout a long evening. 'Our little comedy has been played to the end now, has it not?'

'If you do,' answered Matthew, turning upon her at last in despair, 'you will have to travel in a third-class smoking-carriage, and you will have a most disagreeable companion ; for I make it a rule never to speak to anyone in the train.'

She shrugged her shoulders and made a grimace at him.

'*Au fait*,' she remarked, 'you are not a very brilliant companion at the best of times. Perhaps I will wait another day or two, then, and see the last act. You do well to retire ; for, frankly, you have not played your part skilfully enough to be called before the curtain.'

CHAPTER X

THE REPAYMENT OF A LOAN

EVERYBODY who has passed beyond the period of extreme youth must have been brought face to face with the difficulty of applying general and accurate theories to cases of personal experience. Matthew Austin knew as well as anybody that the human race is inconsistent and perverse, that the female division of the species is more especially so and that the callousness which Lilian had seen fit to affect during their parting interview ought rather to be taken as evidence of sorrow and remorse than of indifference. He knew this, and he would have been the first to point out so patent a fact to any other unfortunate, circumstanced as he was ; yet, since it was he himself who had been made to suffer, he tried in vain to forgive her. It was all very fine to say *nemo repente fuit turpissimus*, it was all very fine to assert that the girl whom he had loved was too proud to plead for pardon and had represented herself as being worse than she really was out of sheer self-contempt ; but, as she herself had remarked, nothing could alter the facts, nor is it within the range of any ordinary philosopher's capacity to diagnose impartially the character of a fellow-creature who has just struck him across the face with a cutting whip.

So Lilian attained her object, which—as the discriminating reader will doubtless have surmised—was to expedite the healing of Matthew's wounds by means of cautery. A physician and surgeon so skilled as the man whom she had jilted could have told her that the process is a risky one ; still, there is no denying that in his own case it was attended with a certain measure of success. Sore though he was, and thrown off his mental balance by treatment for which he had been utterly unprepared, he was nevertheless spared pangs which he could not have escaped, had he retained his former opinion of her. 'I am shamed through all my nature to have loved so slight a thing!' bawls the stentorian martyr of 'Locksley Hall.' Matthew did not use quite such strong language as that ; but he certainly did feel, after he had returned to Wilverton and had spent a few days in the solitude of his own house, that his love for Lilian Murray had been effectually killed. The soreness, to be sure, remained, and was likely to remain for a long time to come ; but his grief was not what it would have been if she had treated him with greater gentleness or if the discovery that her heart belonged to Leonard Jerome had dawned upon him more gradually.

He was even able to laugh a little over the letters which pursued him from the north. Through Lady Sara's apologies and condolences, which were profuse, there ran an evident under-current of apprehension lest she should lose the services of the only doctor in whom she felt any confidence.

'*Really and truly,*' she wrote, 'it is not I who am to blame. I warned you, if you remember, that I had lost all control over Lilian, and at the time when I said that to you, I was more than

half afraid that she was meditating some such *coup de tête* as this. I can't tell you how vexed I am ! It seems as if every member of our family, except myself, had an irresistible craving to do scandalous and uncalled-for things ! Personally, I have never encouraged Mr Jerome in any way, and of course the match is far from being a brilliant one. He says he has expectations from that old uncle of his—one can only trust they may be verified !—and he says also that you have most nobly and generously assured him that this shall make no difference in your friendship for him. I hardly dare to hope that it will make none in your friendship for me.'

Lady Bannock's disclaimer of responsibility and expressions of regret were accompanied by similar deprecatory comments upon the match that her brother was about to make. Leonard, in her opinion, might have done a very great deal better ; she sincerely repented of having asked the Murrays to stay with her ; 'and although, of course, there is nothing to be done now but to put a good face upon it, I can't help feeling very angry with them all. You, I am afraid, must be simply furious, and indeed you have been shamefully treated. The only comforting thing that I can think of to say to you is that that girl would never have settled down to a quiet, humdrum existence. And that, as you may imagine, isn't a particularly comforting reflection to *me !*'

Leonard himself wrote in the highest spirits and with scarcely a trace of penitence.

'I'll tell you what I am going to do,' was his concluding statement ; 'I am going to get you to act as best man on my

wedding-day. That, I should hope, will convince everybody that there is no ill-feeling.'

Finally, there were a few kindly-meant lines from Colonel Standish.

'Never you mind, my dear sir ; those laugh longest who laugh last, and you are not the person most to be pitied in this business, take my word for it. Keep your weather-eye open, and you will see things before you reach my age which will make you thank your stars that you didn't get what you wanted. Stick to shooting. There's nothing like it—not even hunting.'

The recipient of the above missives returned suitable replies to each and all of them. In times of tribulation friends at a distance can, as a rule, be suitably dealt with ; but it is a somewhat harder matter to endure the *vivâ voce* examination of friends on the spot, and from these Matthew was not exempted. Mrs Jennings, it is needless to say, knew that he had been to Bannock Lodge, knew whom he had gone thither to meet, and was so persistent in her demands for categorical information, that it seemed the best and shortest plan to conceal nothing from her. By this means he was at least saved from any necessity for informing other neighbours of his discomfiture, though he could not escape their sympathy and commiseration. Most of them were genuinely sorry for him and genuinely indignant against the faithless Miss Murray ; he had to let them speak their minds freely and bear with the compassion which they lavished upon him. Only Mrs Frere, who, notwithstanding her habitual frankness of speech, was a well-bred woman and had instincts which are not to be acquired,

earned his gratitude by taking everything for granted and asking no questions.

He met her in the town one afternoon, and she cut short the announcement upon which he felt bound to embark by saying briskly :

‘Oh, yes ; so somebody was telling me the other day. What a handsome couple they will make ! I suppose you couldn’t drive home with me and see George, could you ? He is in a great state of mind because he is sure that he is upon the brink of a fit of gout, and we have asked a few men to come to us for the partridge shooting, which is to be better than usual this year, I believe. By the way, how did you get on with the grouse in Scotland ?’

Matthew thanked her with his eyes and at once seated himself beside her in the carriage. On the way to Hayes Park he narrated his exploits on the moors, and received in return a discursive *résumé* of what had taken place in the neighbourhood of Wilverton during his absence.

‘We ourselves have been having some bothers,’ Mrs Frere remarked with a sigh ; ‘but we are at the end of them now, I hope, and, as I always tell George, bygone bothers are much best forgotten. It’s the future bothers that are so difficult to keep out of sight—although nothing is ever so bad as one thinks it is going to be, and things generally end by arranging themselves.’

‘Oh, yes ; and fifty short years hence we shall have reached the land where all bothers are forgotten,’ agreed Matthew, laughing.

Mrs Frere had been so considerate with him that the least

he could do was to return the compliment. He did not, therefore, invite her to particularise ; but he thought it more than likely that Spencer had been giving trouble. This surmise received confirmation when he had been ushered into Mr Frere's so-called study and had prescribed remedies for that choleric old gentleman, whose temper appeared to be in a worse condition than his bodily health.

'Oh, you may say there isn't much the matter with me,' grumbled his patient, 'but the truth is that there's a deuce of a lot the matter with me ! Only my complaint is out of your sphere, I suppose. At least I have never yet met with a doctor who was acquainted with any cure for chronic worry.'

'A pennyworth of patience ?' Matthew suggested.

'H'm ! do you keep that in stock ? You must have a superabundance of it by the look of you. What you fellows are made of now, I can't understand ! In my young days we shouldn't have stood looking on while another man walked coolly off with the girl we were engaged to. Well, there ! I beg your pardon, Austin ; I didn't mean to say that. I daresay you are quite right, and, by all accounts, you have behaved most magnanimously ; only I haven't your calm temperament, you see. Besides which, I can't help thinking that my troubles are a bit worse than yours. You may remember my speaking to you once about my eldest son. Well, he has been here, and the women have been trying to patch up a reconciliation—of course without success. I'm not to blame, and I tell them I don't care a hang ; still, that kind of thing does worry a man, and worry means gout. Don't you know it does ?'

‘Very often,’ assented Matthew.

He felt rather uncomfortable, wondering whether Spencer had betrayed him and not venturing to inquire ; but no additional information was vouchsafed by Mr Frere, who began to talk about the disappointing harvest and the prospect of a still further reduction in already diminished rents. It was not until he rose to take his leave that the old gentleman said hurriedly :

‘I’ll tell you what I wish you would do for me, Austin ; I wish you would just find an opportunity of representing to Anne that I’m not the unnatural father she takes me for. I can’t reinstate my son—knowing what he is, I simply daren’t—and nothing short of reinstatement would do. If you could get her to understand that, I should be obliged to you. I would have said it to her myself, only one has to be so cautious with women ! The moment they think you are yielding they lose all fear of you and begin trying to drive you into a corner.’

Matthew willingly undertook this commission, for the speedy execution of which every facility was afforded him ; for as he left the house, there was Anne, pacing slowly to and fro outside and obviously waiting for him.

‘I have something to give you,’ she began, almost before they had finished exchanging greetings, and she thrust a slip of paper into his hand, as she spoke. ‘It is the money that you advanced to Spencer,’ she explained. ‘I am so thankful that he is able to repay you now !—and so is he. And I want to say, too, how sorry I am for having behaved so horribly to you that afternoon at the garden-party. But perhaps you made

allowances—perhaps you understood what a humiliating position it was to be placed in?’

Matthew nodded, and glanced at the cheque, which was signed ‘Spencer Frere.’ Spencer Frere with a banking account! He could not help elevating his eyebrows and glancing interrogatively at Anne, who reddened slightly.

‘I thought my father might have told you,’ she said.

‘He told me that your brother had been here,’ Matthew answered. ‘He didn’t say much more; but he seemed to be distressed at the idea of having distressed you, and I think he wants you to believe that he is only irreconcilable because he can’t help it.’

‘Perhaps he can’t help it,’ Anne assented despondently. ‘I wish some sort of arrangement could have been come to, but I quite see that it would have been out of the question to forgive and forget. Spencer’s wife is too impossible, unfortunately! You haven’t heard of Spencer’s marriage, then?’

‘Not a word. Has he really married that Mrs Johnson?’

‘Well, she has married him. She seems to have bought his discharge and led him straight off to church. I can’t quite make out whether she cares for him or not; but I hope she does, because my father’s refusal to have anything to do with them has been a terrible disappointment to her, poor woman! She says she has been cruelly deceived. Perhaps she has; although Spencer declares that he warned her how it would be.’

‘She might be acknowledged, one would think. Is she so appallingly vulgar?’

‘She is very common; she dresses loudly and paints her face

and speaks of men by their surnames, without any prefix. I am afraid the utmost that could be done would be to have them here for a short visit now and then. But what my father seems to feel most of all is that Spencer hasn't changed. He does not know of that disgraceful business or of how much indebted we all are to you—'

'Well, I am glad of that, anyhow!' interpolated Matthew.

'Yes; I knew you would not wish him to hear; it was as much for your sake as for my own that I kept the secret. But he says what I suppose is the truth, that Spencer only married in order to be comfortably provided for, and he told Arabella plainly that, since she had chosen to pay a heavy price for the chance of being Mrs Frere of Hayes Park some day, she had nobody but herself to blame for the failure of her speculation.'

'I am rather sorry for poor Arabella,' remarked Matthew, with a smile. 'As for your brother, he appears to have fallen upon his feet. Are they well off?'

'Yes; so far as income is concerned, I believe they are. But I am afraid she is allowing him to have more control over her money than he ought to have, and they were already beginning to quarrel. Naturally enough, she went away in a great rage, and he would only laugh at her. I doubt whether I shall ever see him again,' Anne added sorrowfully.

It really could not be considered very desirable that she ever should; but Matthew was not so unfeeling as to speak out his thoughts. He contented himself with observing that, although material comfort is not everything, it is the best thing that can be looked for in the case of certain individuals, and that Spencer

Frere had been scarcely one of those private soldiers in whose personal kit a field-marshal's bâton is likely to lie concealed. For the rest, he ordered his remarks with that tact which is more often the result of kindheartedness than of deliberate intention, and, as he walked slowly across the park with his companion, he was glad to notice that he was giving her some comfort. When they came within sight of the lodge she stood still and said—rather abruptly and awkwardly, it must be owned :

‘ Mr Austin, I can’t let you go without telling you how very sorry I was to hear of your—’

‘ My disappointment ? ’ suggested Matthew.

‘ Yes, if that is the right word to use. You know how stupid I am—I never can say things as they ought to be said—but I *should* like to see that Mr Jerome soundly horse-whipped ! ’

‘ I am sure you wouldn’t,’ returned Matthew, laughing ; ‘ that would be a most unpleasant sight. Added to which, he doesn’t deserve it.’

‘ Oh, he *does* deserve it ! There might have been some excuse for him if he had not pretended to be so devoted to you and if he had not invited you to stay with his sister ; but to behave as he has done while you were actually his guest—well, I suppose I have no great reason to be proud of Spencer, but I don’t believe Spencer would ever have been guilty of such meanness as that ! ’

‘ It sounds worse than it really was,’ Matthew said. ‘ When Jerome asked me to Scotland he had no more suspicion than I had of what was going to happen. What did happen was prob-

ably inevitable, and, however that may be, I have no grudge against him.'

Anne coloured: she was a little ashamed of having displayed so much warmth and a little mortified by what sounded very like a rebuff.

'Of course, if you are satisfied, there is nothing more to be said,' she remarked.

'I don't pretend to be satisfied, in the sense of being contented; but I bear no malice against Jerome. He didn't pit himself against me deliberately; but from the moment that he was forced to do so he couldn't help winning. Life is nothing but a big game, in which the best players are sure to be victorious. If the vanquished can't take their beating good-humouredly, they are not fit to play at all.'

'I thought it was an essential condition of all games that the play should be fair,' said Anne. 'I must keep my opinion of Mr Jerome; but I will keep it to myself for the future, and I beg your pardon for having been so impertinent as to allude to the subject.'

'Please don't say that! You make me feel as if I had rejected your sympathy; whereas Heaven knows I am only too grateful to anybody who refrains from laughing at me! But I want to be sane and reasonable about the whole thing, if I can; and I suppose the truth is that I was neither the one nor the other when I imagined that a girl like Miss Murray could live happily as the wife of a country doctor. The long and the short of it is that I understand my own sex a good deal better than I do yours: you may have noticed that.'

Anne could not help smiling, though she was still vaguely displeased with him.

‘Yes,’ she answered, ‘you have given me one or two opportunities of noticing that. But,’ she added, after a rather prolonged pause, ‘there is one member of your own-sex about whom you know nothing at all, namely, yourself. When you discover what you really are—but I don’t believe you ever will—you will begin to see what a worthless and thankless lot the rest of us must be.’

CHAPTER XI

A BRACING EXPERIENCE

‘**Y**OU are a French scholar, I believe, Austin,’ said Mr Litton, one wet, stormy afternoon in October ; can you oblige me with an English equivalent for the word *saugrenu* ?’

The old man was pacing up and down his thickly-carpeted library, the warmth and comfort of which contrasted agreeably with the wild weather outside. He paused in front of the table where Matthew was seated, taking notes from an open folio volume, and awaited a reply, his thick grey eyebrows drawn down over his twinkling eyes.

‘I’m afraid I can’t,’ Matthew confessed, looking up. ‘The dictionaries would give you “foolish” or “absurd,” or something of that sort, I suppose.’

‘The dictionaries are very apt to give foolish and absurd translations. No ; I am afraid we cannot match *saugrenu* in our tongue ; and that is annoying, because one sometimes wants to make use of the word. I want rather badly to apply it to your conduct just now, for instance.’

‘Thank you ; but why?’ Matthew inquired.

‘Well, chiefly because it is not to be described by any other adjective ; but partly because I have a lingering hope that you may still be saved from deserving it. You have been jilted, and

you choose to embrace the man who has cut you out ; I don't myself see the necessity for doing so ; yet I am willing to admit that, since public opinion won't allow you to shoot him or thrash him, there is a certain air of chivalry about shaking hands and letting bygones be bygones. But when it comes to attending that man to the altar and looking on benevolently while he is married to the woman who has jilted you, I must own that you altogether exceed the limits of my comprehension and sympathy.'

'But he has set his heart upon it,' Matthew said, 'and he would probably be hurt if I refused. After all, what does it matter?'

'Well, well ! But he isn't so easily hurt as all that ; and I presume you are not particularly anxious to be made the laughing-stock of a whole pack of fools.'

'I don't think I particularly mind,' answered Matthew. 'Besides, I daresay they won't laugh.'

'Oh, they will laugh—laugh from ear to ear. Old Jennings was here this morning, and he would have been a good deal more impertinent about it than he was, if I hadn't turned upon him and made him lick the ground. That nephew of mine has twenty times the impudence of Jennings, or he never would have dared to make such a request to you.'

'He doesn't look at it in that way ; he thinks he is giving me a proof of sincere friendship. And I am not at all sure that he isn't.'

Mr Litton moved away, with an impatient ejaculation, towards one of the windows, where he stood for a while watching

the driving rain and the tossing boughs of the trees. Then he faced about and said :

‘One has a sort of disrespectful admiration for you, Austin.’

‘Well, that is something,’ remarked Matthew good-humouredly.

‘It isn’t much ; but it’s the most you will get from me until you learn to discriminate. Magnanimity is a fine quality in the abstract ; but it loses its attractiveness when it is misapplied. Leonard, as I have told you again and again, and as you will find out some day, is a useless, selfish, ungrateful fellow. You can’t afford to be magnanimous with people of his kind ; they will always either think you are afraid of them or else flatter themselves that they are so fascinating as to be irresistible. They won’t give *you* any credit, take my word for it !’

‘I believe Leonard will give me credit for wishing to please him,’ Matthew answered, ‘and that is really all I care about.’

‘Ah ! there is where you are admirable. You honestly don’t care whether your motives are appreciated or not, and you honestly don’t object to being written down an ass. Well, as I said before, some of your flights take you a little beyond the reach of my understanding or fellow-feeling. Nobody shall call me an ass, if I can help it, nor shall anybody have a plausible excuse for thinking me one. I take it that I should be an ass of the most pronounced type if I were to provide Leonard with an increased income on his marriage, and if he expects anything of the sort, he will be disappointed.’

‘But does he expect it?’ Matthew asked.

‘I don’t know,’ answered the other drily, after throwing a

quick, half-suspicious glance at his questioner ; ' I know he won't get it.'

These two men had become friends, in so far as the great difference between their respective ages and characters rendered friendship possible. Mr Litton had a liking for Matthew which was almost love, and was tempered only by something akin to contempt for the dreamy young physician's detached attitude towards life as a whole ; while Matthew, recognising what was great and what was small in the temperament of the lonely old fellow with whom fortune had dealt so ironically, enjoyed his occasional visits to Wilverton Grange, notwithstanding the petulance with which he was as often as not received there. Mr Litton was afflicted with the sensitiveness of a cripple and the universal distrust bred of riches and the absence of any heir of entail. He had neither objected to nor approved of his nephew's engagement to Lilian Murray, saying and writing that he had no voice in the matter and that, so far as he was concerned, Leonard had nothing to do but to please himself ; but his privately-expressed opinion of the latter's conduct had been scarcely less emphatic than Anne Frere's, and he curtly declined to go up to London for the wedding.

The wedding, it had now been decided, was to take place at St Paul's, Knightsbridge, early in December ; that Matthew had been prevailed upon to play a leading part on the occasion will have been gathered from the above fragment of dialogue. Why he should have been asked to do so was a puzzle to many people besides Mr Litton—to Lady Sara and to Lilian amongst the number—but he himself entered into Leonard's feeling and was

touched rather than repelled by it. Leonard, he knew, was fond of him ; Leonard was a little ashamed and very anxious to give convincing proof to all the world that his friend was his friend still. Nothing could be more natural or more *naïf*, nor did it seem worth while to refuse a request which, to tell the truth, could not be granted without some slight sacrifice of personal comfort and self-respect.

‘Of one thing, at least, I am sure,’ was Mr Litton’s parting remark, ‘and I am glad to be sure of it ; you never can have been in love with that girl. If you had been, I would defy even you to place yourself in such a preposterous position.’

Well, that might be true. Matthew thought of it as he drove rapidly away in his dog-cart to visit patients, of whom he had once more as many as he could manage, and he said to himself that it might be true. Anyhow, the Lilian whom he had loved no longer existed ; it was quite another person who was going to marry Leonard Jerome, with his best wishes for their joint and several happiness. As for his own happiness, he believed that a fair average share of that was assured to him. Scarcely any man, if indeed any man, gets exactly what he wants ; but so long as he has plenty of work to do and likes his work, he had better not grumble. Moreover, there always remained the garden and the greenhouses. ‘Which is better than Colonel Standish’s shooting,’ Matthew reflected, ‘because there is no close time for plants.’

Yet for all his courage and all his self-abnegation, that autumn was a dreary season for him. The exigencies of a rapidly developing practice left him little leisure for brooding during the

daytime, but five or six hours out of the twenty-four had to be spent in bed, and when he went to bed he could not always contrive to go to sleep. Then it was that the future loomed dark and solitary before him; then it was that the past looked fantastically unreal and the present barely endurable; then, too, it was that he pronounced certain judgments upon womankind in general which in brighter moments he would have hastened to repudiate. If only those interminable November days and nights would pass! There were thirty of them to be lived through, as well as a few at the beginning of December to be added to their number, and at the risk of causing readers to laugh from ear to ear, like Dr Jennings, it has to be avowed that Matthew at this time kept a little schoolboy's calendar, erasing a date from it every evening before he retired to rest and contemplating, with a diurnal sigh of relief, the slowly descending array of black strokes. 'When once it is over and done with, I shall be all right,' he was wont to assure himself.

The sun, meanwhile, continued to rise and set with monotonous regularity, and if there was no sunshine in London when Matthew at length stepped out upon the platform at the terminus, the electric light sufficed to render the features of the fur-coated gentleman who was awaiting his arrival recognisable.

'I had to come and meet you, after getting your telegram,' Leonard said, wringing his hand cordially. 'Nonsense about your going to an hotel! I've been there and countermanded your room. You are to make yourself at home in my humble diggings, please. As soon as you have washed the blacks off

and changed your clothes we'll go round to the club and have some dinner. Well, and how are you, old man? You're looking very fit.'

Matthew was glad to hear that, because he had no desire to look as wretched as he felt. He submitted without useless demur to the arrangements made by his companion, and was soon being whirled off westwards in a hansom towards the latter's abode, Leonard, who was in exuberant spirits, talking the whole time.

In truth this meeting between two former friends had none of the embarrassment which might have been expected to attend it. Leonard really seemed to have forgotten all that it was convenient to forget, and spoke as unreservedly of the morrow's ceremony and of plans for the future as if there had never been any thought of love-passages between the bride-elect and his patient hearer. Matthew learnt from him that the young couple were to spend their honeymoon in Italy—'Rather a *bourgeois* sort of thing to do,' the expectant bridegroom remarked, 'but there seemed to be no alternative'—and that they were eventually to take up their residence at Stanwick Hall, Leonard's place in Northumberland, which had lately been vacated by his tenants and was about to be refurbished for the reception of its owner. There was not too much money available for the refurbishing process, Leonard avowed, with a laugh and a grimace.

'I had a faint hope,' he said, 'that Uncle Richard might come down handsomely upon the occasion; but he doesn't seem to see his duty in that light. He has presented Lilian

with a diamond necklace and he has sent me a cheque for five hundred—which, I suspect, is about as much as we shall get out of him until it pleases Heaven to call him to his long home. What a lot these rich old beggars lose by clinging to money which they can't spend! When I step into my revered uncle's shoes, I shall make a point of allowing some poor devil a thousand a year. Talk about the virtue of making other people happy!—why, there's no luxury to compare with it! *You* ought to know that, if anybody does.'

Matthew knew it so well that he spent quite a pleasant evening and was able to make some show of appreciating the culinary excellence for which the club to which Leonard belonged was famous; but the whole of the evening, it appeared, was not to be devoted to tobacco and peaceful conversation, and it was not without dismay that he discovered why he had been made to dine a full hour earlier than usual.

'Now, I'll tell you what I want you to do,' Leonard said, after they had adjourned to the smoking-room—and it was plain, from the coaxing intonation of his voice, that he had some doubts as to how the suggestion which he was about to make would be received—'I want you just to come round to Grosvenor Place for a few minutes. Did I tell you that some cousins of Lady Sara's, who have gone abroad, have lent her their house for the wedding? Well, they have; and I said I would look in this evening to get final instructions, so as to avoid the risk of any hitch to-morrow.'

'You can take your instructions without my assistance, I should think,' objected Matthew.

‘Yes ; but Lady Sara rather wanted to see you. The fact is that she proposes to spend the winter at Wilverton—it seems the best place for her—and we thought you might be able to give her information about lodgings and all that. Indeed, if you didn’t mind the trouble, it would be a very great kindness to escort her on her journey. Lilian doesn’t feel quite happy about her travelling alone.’

In for a penny, in for a pound!—Matthew had already swallowed camels of such large proportions that he was scarcely entitled to strain at this gnat ; although he could not but marvel a little at Lilian’s willingness to meet him and make use of him.

He marvelled still more when he saw her and when she offered him her hand with a pleasant smile, as though he had been merely an old acquaintance. She was looking brilliantly beautiful, she exhibited no trace of nervousness, her speech and manner struck him as according perfectly with the spacious, luxurious dwelling which had been placed at her mother’s disposal. She was going to be a smart, modern married woman, and apparently she had not waited for her marriage to assume the tone that belonged to her future *rôle*. Leonard and she soon retired to the other extremity of the long room, leaving him to talk to Lady Sara, who, for her part, was quite unchanged.

‘How good you are!’ the penitent lady murmured. ‘It really isn’t natural to be so good, and if you would call me a few bad names, I should feel ever so much more comfortable. Not that I deserve them, Heaven knows!’

‘I am sure you don’t,’ Matthew declared cheerfully. ‘Moreover, it wouldn’t add at all to my comfort to call anybody bad names. So we are to have you back at Wilverton, I am glad to hear.’

He soon set her at her ease, and in doing so recovered his own mental equilibrium, which had been for a moment in jeopardy. He thought it very likely that he might be able to secure Lady Sara’s old rooms in Prospect Place for her; but as she seemed to dread the idea of going to an hotel all by herself, he suggested that she should accompany him home, the next day, and stay with him until a more permanent arrangement could be effected. The offer was immediately and gratefully accepted; Lilian, on being informed of it, thanked Matthew with all the warmth, though perhaps with something short of the surprise, that the occasion seemed to call for; he could not help wondering whether it had been expected of him that he should give an invitation which would undoubtedly cause much annoyance to his housekeeper and which might not improbably reawaken the merriment of the good folks of Wilverton.

Well, in any case, he was glad to be of service to Lady Sara, whom he liked and who had always been kind to him. He was also, it must be confessed, very glad indeed to get away from Grosvenor Place and from the false position of which nobody but himself appeared to recognise the falsity.

‘I shall see you again to-morrow afternoon, so I won’t say good-bye,’ Lilian remarked at the last moment. ‘So awfully kind of you to take charge of mamma! I sha’n’t worry

about her, now that I know she will be in such good hands. By the way, I hope you are prepared for a tremendous function to-morrow. We are going to do the thing in the most approved style—combining decency and propriety, you know, with etc., etc.—like the Economic Funeral Company. How you will hate it all!’

‘I don’t think I quite expected to enjoy it,’ answered Matthew quietly, permitting himself that one little piece of bad taste.

It was not resented ; nor, if the taste of Lilian’s behaviour so far had seemed to him doubtful, could he find any fault with that of her demeanour on the following day, which was as unexceptionable as her costume and the quality of the numerous guests who had been invited to witness her nuptials. Matthew acquitted himself of his own part in the proceedings creditably enough. In the midst of that gay and parti-coloured throng he found that he was less conspicuous than he had expected to be—found, too, that the bitterness of the experience had been to a great extent discounted in advance. He had pictured the scene to himself so many times in imagination that the reality scarcely hurt him. He was even a little interested in casting his eye over the assemblage, which included a number of well-known persons, and in studying the general effect, which was as pleasing as fine clothes, a surpliced choir and an abundance of plants and cut flowers could make it. If economy had been studied in the matter, that virtue must, he presumed, have found expression only in the omission of the old-fashioned wedding-breakfast, for it looked as though somebody would

have a very respectable little bill to pay before other contingent expenses were defrayed. Lord Kingsbridge, a wizened little old man, with a waxed moustache and a hyacinthine wig, had come over from Paris, where he resided, to give his niece away ; the bridesmaids had been selected with a due regard alike to rank and to beauty ; the hierarchy was well represented behind the altar-rails ; nothing, in short, save the countenance of Royalty, was wanting to impart to the ceremonial a character of the very highest distinction.

In accordance with modern usage, a homily was addressed to the newly-married pair, to which they listened with admirable self-possession ; then the register was signed, and then there was a reception in Grosvenor Place, which was only graced for a few brief minutes by the presence of the bride and bridegroom, who had to catch a train. How grateful we ought to be to the conventional necessities by which we are ruled and which relieve existence of its most harrowing accessories !

‘It hasn’t been half as bad as assisting at a clinical lecture,’ was Matthew’s professional and half-humorous summing-up ; ‘there has been no room for emotion, or a suggestion of it, from start to finish. Such a thing would have been ludicrously out of place, and nobody, to look at us all, could have supposed that we possessed an immortal soul amongst the whole of us.’

All things considered, he was glad that he had complied with Leonard’s request. He thought the experience had had a bracing effect upon him—as indeed perhaps it had. What tender or regretful or reproachful sentiment could he continue to cherish with regard to a lady whose parting speech to him

was—‘Mind you make them put a hot-water tin into the railway-carriage for mamma to-morrow—she will be too tired to travel down to-night, I am afraid, and I suppose Wilverton can spare you for another twenty-four hours. Good-bye. My love to your friends the Freres when you see them.’

CHAPTER XII

HONEYMOONING

FOR reasons which were complex in their nature, and of which the complexity does not demand analysis here, it had pleased Lilian to present herself to Matthew Austin as a heartless and not too delicate young woman ; but it was in no such guise, or disguise, that she dealt with her husband. Her love for him was so passionate, so overwhelming, that it seemed as if she could neither speak nor think of anything else ; her long and stubborn resistance only made her present surrender the more complete ; she delighted in anticipating his wishes and in performing little unnecessary acts of humility for him ; to belong entirely and of right to him may have had for her something of the exquisite, albeit transient, savour of a suddenly legitimised sin.

Wise men and women—especially wise women—would doubtless have shaken their heads over her and warned her that she was setting to work in quite the wrong way ; that lovers form one class of human beings, while husbands form another ; that nothing is more certain to weary a man in the long run than excessive demonstrations of affection, and that Leonard Jerome, in particular, was not so constituted as to bear that method of treatment. But it is not customary for young couples to be

attended during their honeymoon by a chorus of sages, and thus Lilian's prolonged wanderings by sea and land in the sunny regions of the Mediterranean were productive of nothing but unmixed happiness to her.

Leonard, who was also very much in love, was equally happy and equally willing to protract to its utmost limits that experience of earthly paradise which is necessarily brief for everybody and which comes to an end for good and all as soon as we are reminded that our present place of residence is not paradise but earth. In the case of this favoured pair such reminders were not likely to be over-insistent. Leonard had no profession nor any urgent duties which could entail a recall to his native land ; he was very well contented to dawdle, without fixed purpose or design, along the Italian, the Spanish and the North African coasts, to bask among flowers in the warm sun, to be rocked upon gently-heaving waters under azure skies and to keep up a perpetual dreamy duet which was as yet diversified by no half-hidden discords. If, when he happened to glance at an English sporting paper, it did sometimes occur to him that this was a queer sort of way for a hunting man in perfect health to be spending the winter, the thought merely added a touch of piquancy to his enjoyment. He had no regrets, no objection to remaining abroad until after Easter, no wish to be roused too soon out of his delicious day-dream. The only difference between him and his wife was that he expected, as a matter of course, to wake up some fine morning, whereas she did not.

It was at Palermo, whither their devious peregrinations took them in the month of March, that they were at length deserted

by their good luck in the matter of weather. The period of the spring Equinox was at hand ; for twenty-four hours a heavy gale, accompanied by torrents of rain, had been raging and Lilian, her nose forlornly flattened against the window-pane, was unable to detect any symptom of a break in the low, leaden sky.

‘It looks as if this might go on until the last inhabitant was drowned!’ she exclaimed. ‘Can that dismal, green sea be our dear Mediterranean? I believe it is the English Channel that has come tumbling across Europe to see how we are getting on.’

‘It may report to friends at a distance that we are bearing up as well as can be expected,’ returned Leonard philosophically. He had thrown himself down upon a sofa, and was lying on the flat of his back, with his hands clasped behind his head and one long leg swinging lazily over the other. ‘Cheer up,’ he continued, laughing at the dismal countenance which his wife turned towards him ; ‘we might have been weather-bound in a worse place, after all. What can I suggest for you to do? Reading?—writing?—fancy-work? By the way, now that I come to think of it, I don’t believe you have read a single Tauchnitz novel since we were married, and as for a needle, I’m not sure that you even possess such a thing. *Do* you ever go in for fancy-work, Lil?’

‘Oh, yes, I used—and other work too. I have made my own frocks before now. But it wasn’t of myself that I was thinking, it was of you. Two wet days in a foreign hotel are such a fearful ordeal for a man!’

‘For some men, perhaps; but I’m all right. One of the chief beauties of my character is that I can do nothing for a

week at a stretch without grumbling. Didn't old Austin ever tell you how good I was that time when I had deprived myself of the use of both my arms?'

Lilian made no reply; she very seldom did reply when her husband dragged Matthew's name into the conversation. But presently she said:

'Wouldn't you like to go down to the smoking-room and see whether there are any other occupationless Englishmen there? I think I may as well write to mamma.'

Hitherto in the course of their journey they had avoided fellow-travellers and had spoken only to occasional friends whom they had come across here and there. Perhaps she was not very anxious that he should act upon her suggestion; for she was inclined to be jealous of him and secretly exulted in the thought that he never cared to leave her. However, he rose, yawned, stretched himself and said,—

'Well, if you're going to write, I'll just spy out the land for half an hour. I forgot to examine the Visitors' Book, but I don't suppose there is anybody here whom one knows.'

As it happened, there was somebody in the hotel whom he knew: at least, there was somebody who knew him and accosted him at the foot of the staircase, though he, for his part, failed to recognise this well-dressed and carefully-brushed young man, with the fair moustache and the unmistakable air of a British officer in plain clothes.

'Are you at Gib or Malta now?' Leonard asked at a venture, after shaking hands.

'I see you don't know who I am,' answered the other, laugh-

ing. 'We used sometimes to meet in days gone by at my governor's place, near Wilverton. My name's Frere.'

'Oh, yes, of course!—I beg your pardon. That was some years ago, wasn't it?' said Leonard, looking a little askance at his former acquaintance. He had forgotten the circumstances of Spencer's banishment, but was certainly under the impression that the latter had done something very shady. 'Have you—er—been home lately?' he inquired.

'I paid a very brief visit to the cradle of my race last autumn,' Spencer replied, divining the significance of the question and responding to it with a certain defiant good humour, 'but I was not pressed to stay. My people, I am sorry to say, don't appreciate me, although I am a respectable married man nowadays and never do anything naughty. There's no saying what one mightn't be driven to do if one were kept for any length of time in a place like this, though. Mercifully, my wife finds it a bit more than she can bear, and she talks of moving on to Malta, where she expects to fall in with some old friends. My wife,' added Spencer explanatorily, as he lighted a cigarette, 'likes to hear the roll of the drum. She used to reside in a garrison town before she did me the honour of espousing me *en secondes nocces*.'

'What a fearful cad this man has become!' was Leonard's inward ejaculation; 'no wonder his poor old father can't stand him!' Nevertheless, he was amused, and almost attracted, by Spencer's cheery impudence, which, as he presently reflected, had at least the merit of candour. 'I am a scamp who has been married by a rich widow,' the fellow seemed to say. 'Now

you know all about it, and if you prefer to turn your back upon me, you can.'

It is quite possible that Leonard might have turned his back had this encounter taken place in Hyde Park ; but, local and atmospheric conditions being what they were, he felt entitled to be less particular, and presently he found himself playing an experimental game of billiards with his compatriot upon an ancient, pocketless table, over which the heavy balls rolled slowly with a rumble as of distant thunder. Spencer continued to be chatty and communicative, making no secret of the fact that he had been disowned by his family and mentioning that his wife was a good deal more sore upon the subject than he was.

'She seemed to think that she had only to show herself for them to rush into her arms,' he remarked. 'Oddly enough, her appearance didn't produce that effect upon them, and now she blames me for it—which is a most unreasonable thing to do. I always warned her that her style of beauty wasn't what they were accustomed to. Hullo, Arabella! is that you? Let me introduce Mr Jerome, whom I think you must have heard about from Anne. Anyhow, you heard about Mrs Jerome—though she wasn't Mrs Jerome then.'

Leonard could well believe that the Frere family had failed to be fascinated by the plump lady who entered the billiard-room and who had availed herself so unstintingly of those preparations whereby the handiwork of Nature is said to be improved. Mrs Spencer Frere might have been pretty once upon a time ; but that period of her career appeared to belong to a somewhat remote past, and it is always a question whether

wrinkles are not more becoming to the human countenance than three or four thick coats of whitewash. Mrs Spencer's face was as free from wrinkles as her gown, though far less skilfully made up, her hair was of an uncompromising yellow tint, while her eyebrows and eyelashes were startlingly black. Upon the whole, a spectacle to make the compassionate beholder trust that she had no idea of what she looked like.

In all probability she had none; for she combined her acknowledgment of Leonard's bow with an extremely coquettish glance, and her subsequent conversation proved her to be a lady accustomed to admiration. She talked with much volubility and was rather amusing, in a slangy, third-rate style; but Leonard was quite sure that he did not wish to introduce her to his wife, which was a little awkward; because that, it seemed, was just what Mrs Spencer wanted him to do.

'I am dying to make Mrs Jerome's acquaintance,' she was good enough to declare. 'I have been catching glimpses of you both since you arrived, but you're so awfully exclusive that there's no getting near you. I wonder whether we might take the liberty of coming into your sitting-room after dinner this evening; you *must* be so bored, all by yourselves from morning to night!'

Leonard thought for a moment of regretting that his wife had a very bad headache; but he lacked the requisite courage to cruelty. 'And, after all,' he reflected, 'it is in the last degree unlikely that we shall ever see these people again.' So he went upstairs to make his excuses to Lilian, who only shrugged her shoulders and said it couldn't be helped; and at the hour appointed the threatened visit was duly paid.

A temporary cessation of wind and rain occurring at that time, the two men soon stepped out upon the balcony to smoke, and Spencer took that opportunity to speak in highly eulogistic terms of a certain common friend of theirs.

‘He’s too good a fellow for this wicked world ; that’s all there is the matter with Austin,’ he remarked. ‘A man who’s so con-foundedly good as all that is bound to be made a victim of, you know. It took me some little time to believe that he wasn’t a bit of a humbug, I confess ; but there’s no doubt about it—he’s the real thing.’

‘There can be no sort of doubt about his being the real thing,’ Leonard agreed heartily. ‘Where did you meet him?’

‘I’m not sure that he would like me to tell you ; he is one of those modest chaps who prefer to blush unseen. As for me, I’ve lost the trick of blushing, and I only hold my tongue about myself, when I do hold my tongue, for the sake of other people. However, I don’t mind telling you that Austin did me a tremendous great service once out of sheer kindness of heart. Deuce another motive can he have had for it, that I have ever been able to discover!’

‘Oh, that motive would be sufficient for him,’ Leonard said. ‘Nobody knows better than I do what a good heart dear old Matthew Austin has.’

He had a comfortable feeling that this was a handsome, as well as a deserved, tribute to pay to the character of his absent friend, and he was quite at a loss to understand why Spencer Frere suddenly burst out laughing. The latter changed the subject, without offering any explanation of his rather rude

behaviour, and they discussed quail-shooting until they were summoned back into the sitting-room for their coffee.

Lilian, meanwhile, had been made to feel somewhat ill at ease by the extremely candid revelations of the lady whom she had been left to entertain, and who proclaimed herself, without hesitation or disguise, to be an ill-used, a deceived and an undeceived woman.

‘I don’t know whether you have heard my husband’s history,’ Mrs Spencer said ; ‘I am not sure that I have heard the whole of it myself. But, beyond having been a little wild in his youth, he doesn’t seem to have done anything to deserve such treatment as he has received, and, considering that he hadn’t a penny of his own when I married him, I do think I was justified in expecting a different sort of welcome at Hayes Park.’

She gave a graphic description of her abortive visit to Wilverton—a description which, if accurate, seemed to go a long way towards accounting for its failure—and then proceeded to bewail her folly in having married a man who was destined to be dependent upon her for the rest of his days. That she had made a bad bargain was doubtless her own fault, and she was too self-seeking and vulgar-minded to command ready sympathy ; still, it was evident, from certain incidental expressions, that she had begun by being really fond of her good-for-nothing husband and that he did not now even pretend to have any affection for her. He never had pretended very much ; but Lilian could not know that ; so she was moved to the compassion which all young wives feel for the neglected wives of other men.

The consequence was that when Spencer strolled in from the

balcony and drew his chair up to the corner of the sofa upon which Mrs Jerome was seated, his advances were not met in a friendly spirit. Possibly they would not, in any event, have been so met; for his manner with ladies did not err on the side of over-refinement and the bold stare which he saw fit to fix upon his neighbour was scarcely ingratiating. Be that as it may, he had not been talking for many minutes before he was so sharply snubbed that he very nearly lost his temper. He avenged himself by remarking :

‘You seem to have the gift of saying uncommonly nasty things, Mrs Jerome; I hope you don’t inflict many of them on your husband. Not that he doesn’t deserve some punishment, if it comes to that.’

Lilian, stirred by some vague suspicion, was foolish enough to return :

‘I don’t know what you mean.’

‘Oh, I was only thinking of poor Austin. That was a scurvy trick that you played upon him, both of you, by all accounts, and you ought to be made to smart for it in one way or another. Though I must say that I don’t feel quite as sorry for him as I did.’

The great advantage of downright insult over mere innuendo—and many modern politicians appear to be aware of this—is that it so often renders retaliation impossible. Short of making an absurd and undignified scene, there was really no answer to be made to the man, and Lilian, perhaps, did the only thing that could be done by getting up and walking across to the window, where Mrs Spencer, with her coffee-cup in her hand,

was entertaining Leonard with an account of an exciting polo-match between the 22d Lancers and the 9th Hussars.

‘Such good fellows, all of them, and great friends of mine ! I only wish there was a cavalry regiment at Malta, but perhaps there may be somebody on the staff who will help to cheer me up a little.’

Spencer, not in the least abashed, came up and joined in the conversation.

‘Arabella,’ he explained, ‘is like the Grande Duchesse de G  rolstein ; *elle aime les militaires*. In fact, she resembles the Grande Duchesse in more ways than one. Fritz, if you remember—’

‘Oh, nobody remembers an opera that came out before we were any of us born,’ interrupted Mrs Spencer, sacrificing strict veracity to a desire to close her husband’s mouth.

Outspoken though she was, she did not particularly care about telling everybody that she had espoused a ranker, and Spencer was entirely devoid of shame or reticence upon the subject.

As soon as the couple had departed, Lilian exclaimed :

‘What outrageous people ! Now mind, Leonard, nothing—*nothing* on earth—will induce me to speak to that man again !’

‘Well, he *is* rather offensive, I must admit,’ said Leonard.

‘*Rather* offensive !—he is simply the most impudent human being that I have ever met in all my life !’

‘Why, what has he been saying to you ?’ asked Leonard, with uplifted brows.

But Lilian did not explain ; and at that moment Leonard’s servant entered the room, bearing a batch of belated letters

from England which caused Spencer Frere to be temporarily forgotten.

After a few moments Leonard looked up from his correspondence and whistled.

‘By Jove, Lil!’ said he, ‘here’s quite a new development. My old uncle writes that Grey, who has represented Wilverton for the last ten years, has accepted a Colonial Governorship, and he wants me to stand for the vacancy. What do you think?’

‘I don’t know,’ answered Lilian doubtfully. ‘Would that mean that we should have to go back at once?’

‘Oh, it would mean going back at once, of course. The only question is whether I am to embrace a Parliamentary career or not. It is what the old man has always wished, and I presume, from what he says, that he intends to see me through. As far as expenses go, I mean. And it’s rather important not to offend him, you know.’

Lilian felt that it would be out of the question to hesitate, and she said as much. Nevertheless, she added rather dolorously:

‘We must give up Rome at Easter, then, and Sorrento and Amalfi and—and everything! Aren’t you a little bit sorry, Leonard?’

‘Oh, I’m inconsolable!’ he answered, laughing and kissing her. ‘Still, we *have* had a tolerably liberal share of honeymooning, haven’t we?’

CHAPTER XIII

SIR WILLIAM BAXENDALE

ONE dry, windy afternoon in spring, Matthew was about to enter the house in Prospect Place which had been occupied by Lady Sara Murray for some months past when the door was opened to give egress to Mrs Frere, whose carriage was waiting for her.

‘So it is all settled, I hear,’ said she, ‘and the Jeromes are expected back from Italy any day. Lady Sara seems to be in the seventh heaven about it.’

‘I didn’t know it was settled,’ answered Matthew ; ‘I knew Jerome had been asked to stand.’

‘Oh, yes ; he is to issue his address as soon as he arrives. Of course one must pray for his success, since he is coming forward in the Conservative interest ; still I can’t help feeling a little personal bias in favour of Sir William Baxendale, who might just as well have called himself a Liberal Unionist. You haven’t met Sir William yet, have you ?’

Matthew shook his head.

‘I never meet anybody except patients in these days.’

‘Oh, I know that,’ returned Mrs Frere, with a laugh ; ‘I am quite tired of asking you to dine and being told how deeply you regret that you are too busy to make dinner engagements. But

I wish you could meet Sir William, because I am sure you would like him, and he is one of our oldest friends. He shut the place up and went away, you know, after poor Lady Baxendale died, two years ago ; but he seems to have quite recovered now, and he means to live at home in future, I believe, whether he is returned or not.'

'Well, I am glad you will not lose your friend if the election goes as I hope it will,' remarked Matthew.

Mrs Frere smiled.

'Oh, I don't think we shall lose him,' she answered. Then she looked as if she had something more to say, and finally could not resist saying it. 'Quite between ourselves,' she began—'would you mind walking on a few steps with me? The carriage can follow—*quite* between ourselves, I have certain little hopes of my own. Anne has been a great deal at the Priory lately ; she is fond of the two girls, who are growing up now, and she has always been intimate with Emma Baxendale, Sir William's sister, who is keeping house for him provisionally. Of course all this is entirely in the clouds, and I may be altogether mistaken about his wishes ; still—it *would* be such a good thing, wouldn't it ?'

'Isn't he rather old for her ?' Matthew hazarded.

'Only fifty-four, which is really nothing nowadays. Besides, I have felt convinced for a long time past that Anne would end by bestowing herself upon some widower or other. What I was afraid of was that she would select a poverty-stricken widower with an endless family. Now this dear Sir William must have a clear £15,000 a year, George says, and only the two girls, who

will be grown-up and married before one knows where one is.'

'I see,' said Matthew absently.

'Why do you look as if you disapproved? Surely you don't think his being a Radical is any objection! A man with his estates can't really be a Radical; it is only a way of talking. And, after all, it would be rather dull if everybody held the same opinions.'

'Sir William Baxendale has my full leave to hold any political opinions that he likes,' answered Matthew, rousing himself from his abstraction and laughing. 'As far as that goes, I daresay I should be a Radical myself, if I were anything. From what you tell me, I should say that the match would be a most suitable one in every way, except as regards disparity of age. And, to be sure, a man of fifty-four is not necessarily an old man.'

Nevertheless, this project did not please him. It kept recurring to his thoughts all through his subsequent talk with Lady Sara, who was in high spirits at the prospect of seeing Lilian again so soon and who was persuaded that a seat in Parliament would be the very thing to provide her son-in-law with an outlet for superfluous energy. There was no real reason, save the one he had mentioned, for objecting to Anne's marriage with the widowed baronet: assuredly the reason which might once have existed was not even remotely present to his mind. He had seen very little of her during the winter months and had never been re-admitted to that footing of intimacy which had rendered the early period of their acquaintanceship so pleasant; he liked her and was still a good deal interested in her; but, as he was

pretty sure that, for some reason or other, she did not like him, he had not gone out of his way to seek her society. It could not, therefore, make much difference to him whether she married A. or B. or remained a spinster. Upon the whole, he concluded that what had rubbed him the wrong way was Mrs Frere's genially unromantic treatment of the affair. If one is to have no romance in one's own life, one does like to be refreshed by glimpses of it in the lives of one's friends.

Refreshment of that nature was dealt out to him ungrudgingly a few days later, when Leonard Jerome invaded his solitude at an early hour, with descriptions of life in the glorious south which were almost as regretful as they were enthusiastic.

'I thought I should catch you if I rode over the first thing in the morning,' Leonard said. Have you any breakfast to give a hungry man? We're staying at the Grange, you know, and the old man never shows before the middle of the day, so I ventured to absent myself.'

He proclaimed himself supremely happy; he declared that his existence since his marriage had been one continuous dream of bliss; he was evidently under the impression that these tidings would give unqualified satisfaction to the friend who had formerly been his rival.

'I assure you,' said he, 'that when we landed at Dover yesterday in a vile east wind, I had more than half a mind to be off back again by the night boat.'

'And the election?' said Matthew, laughing.

'Oh, well, the election—yes, it wouldn't have done to miss one's chances; though what they are worth I'm sure I don't

know. Uncle Richard is full of confidence, and so amiable that I think he must be going to die. He couldn't have welcomed me more affectionately last night if I had been a returned prodigal—which is what he seems to take me for. I trust I sha'n't grieve him by coming in at the bottom of the poll; but, judging by the letters that I have received, Baxendale will take a lot of beating, and there isn't too much time. The whole thing will be a horrid grind, that's certain! Now, let's hear your news. What have you been doing with yourself all this winter?'

'Very much what I did last winter,' answered Matthew, 'and very much what I shall do in all future winters, I suppose. The daily round, the common task—you would call it a horrid grind, but it seems to satisfy me.'

'It is always satisfactory to do things which one knows that one can do thoroughly well,' Leonard declared generously. 'Lady Sara says you are *the* swell doctor of Wilverton now, and old Jennings will soon have to retire on his ill-gotten gains.'

'Oh, you have seen Lady Sara, then?'

'Yes, she dined with us last night. She had never been inside the house before, and I think the sight of all those expensive pictures and that general magnificence increased her respect for me. It's lucky that Uncle Richard is too obstinate to consult you professionally; otherwise, I know you would make a point of keeping him alive up to the age of ninety. You have such mistaken notions of benevolence!'

Matthew did not smile, finding that these jokes of Leonard's had rather too much flavour of earnestness about them to be funny, and presently the latter resumed:

‘Oh, and that reminds me that we came across one undeserving subject of your benevolence in Sicily—Spencer Frere, the son of the old boy at Hayes Park, who won’t have anything to do with him because he’s so beastly undeserving. I must say he looks the character. When you get an opportunity, just ask Lil how she liked him, and then you’ll hear some language! He’s grateful to you, though—says you did him a great service once. Does that mean that you were insane enough to back a bill for him?’

Matthew said it did not mean that, but declined to be drawn into further revelations. He asked a few questions, however, about Spencer and his wife, thinking that Anne might perhaps be glad of any information that he could give her respecting her brother.

But indeed Leonard’s report was of so discouraging a nature that it seemed scarcely worth imparting to any of Spencer’s well-wishers, and Matthew must have had some other motive, conscious or unconscious, for stopping Miss Frere when he met her in the street that same afternoon. She was accompanied by a stout, good-humoured, middle-aged lady whom he at once divined to be Miss Baxendale, and to whom he was presently introduced.

‘Emma is canvassing from house to house,’ Anne explained; ‘I wait outside, because I mustn’t countenance Radical misrepresentations.’

‘But your sympathies step in with me, my dear; I take care to mention that to electors, who quite understand that you are not to blame for being the daughter of a malignant Tory,’ Miss

Baxendale remarked, with a loud but not disagreeable laugh.

And as this capable lady had business to transact in the house opposite to which they were standing, Matthew took advantage of being left for a few minutes with her companion to ask :

‘Is that so? Are your sympathies with the opposite candidate?’

‘I am afraid I have no very strong political sympathies either way,’ she answered. ‘I am a Tory just as I am a member of the Church of England, and I am quite contented to be both. Only it wasn’t I who formed my convictions; they were handed over to me ready-made.’

‘Then perhaps it is with Sir William Baxendale, as an individual, that you sympathise?’

‘Well, I certainly prefer him, as an individual, to Mr Jerome. However, as I have no vote, I shall not be tempted to betray my party, so it doesn’t matter. I suppose,’ added Anne, looking down the street, ‘you have not seen the Jeromes since they arrived.’

Matthew replied that he had seen one of them, and then mentioned the circumstance of their having fallen in with Spencer at Palermo.

‘I thought you would like to hear that your brother was well and—prosperous,’ he said, by way of apology for having detained her.

‘What did Mr Jerome think of them?’ inquired Anne quickly. ‘Did he say that they were prospering?—that they got on well together?’

‘Oh, I believe he only saw them once,’ answered Matthew evasively.

‘Ah! I understand. I have had very little hope from the first. It is just possible that they may remain friends until he has spent all her money; but after that!—’

‘You must not be such a pessimist,’ said Matthew. ‘For one thing, I don’t see why she should allow him to spend all her money, and, for another thing, I have reason to know that your brother is not ungrateful to people who have helped him.’

‘He will never be grateful to her, because she is his wife. I daresay you wouldn’t feel as I do, but it seems to me that Spencer’s marriage is much the worst thing that he has done—the most degrading, I mean. To marry merely for the sake of comfort or position is unpardonable in a man, I think.’

‘But not in a woman?’ asked Matthew, eyeing her curiously.

‘A woman’s case is different; her motives aren’t likely to be altogether selfish. Anyhow, she doesn’t despise herself for having acted in that way as a man must.’

An imprudent and impolite observation was upon the tip of Matthew’s tongue, but was fortunately checked by the advent of a broad-shouldered, thick-set gentleman, whose short beard was besprinkled with grey, yet whose comely countenance certainly did not seem to have faced the world for upwards of half a century. Sir William Baxendale was, and is, an extremely popular personage with all classes, being the happy possessor of those three great incentives to popularity—a full purse, an admirable temper and a pleasant manner. He was

not at all unlikely to succeed in any enterprise to which he might turn his attention, and he told Anne cheerfully that, so far as he could see, he was going to win that election.

‘I have just met my opponent,’ said he. ‘A nice young fellow, but scarcely formidable. Grey, of course, was a distinguished man, and constituencies rather like to be represented by distinguished men; still I am by no means sure that even Grey would have come in again upon the present register.’ He knew all about Matthew, with whom he shook hands heartily, remarking that differences of political opinion were, luckily, no bar to private friendship. ‘Mr Frere himself, in whose presence I dare not so much as utter the name of my revered leader, hasn’t turned his back upon me yet,’ he added, laughing.

Upon the whole, Matthew, as he went his way, could not but acknowledge that the woman who should marry Sir William Baxendale would not have the same reasons for self-contempt as the man who had married Mrs Johnson. ‘I suppose she means to take him,’ he reflected. ‘Well, it’s her affair, and one can’t blame her—though I fancied that in matters of that kind she had a rather higher standard than the rest of her sex. But probably the differences between them are only differences of degree.’

The impartiality of Matthew’s judgment had, it will be perceived, been slightly disturbed by his personal experiences; and indeed he would have been an amazingly impartial and clear-sighted man if, during the days that followed, he had been able to do justice to Lilian. He saw her frequently both

at the Grange and at her mother's house, but found it quite impossible to be friendly with her. That she should avoid him as much as she could was doubtless natural enough; but he really did not see what he had done to deserve the sarcastic, flippanant tone which it pleased her to assume in addressing him, nor did he like her allusions to his friendship for Miss Frere, whose name, it appeared, was already being freely mentioned in conjunction with that of the Radical candidate.

'Had you not better be bestirring yourself?' Lilian asked him, one day. 'This doughty Sir William evidently doesn't let the grass grow under his feet, and if he can't beat Leonard, he may console himself by cutting you out. But perhaps you are too philosophical to mind being cut out.'

It seemed to Matthew that bad taste could hardly go farther than that, and he may be excused for congratulating himself in that he was at least able to endure with philosophy the memory of having been cut out once.

What became increasingly evident to him, as the day fixed for the election drew near, was that Sir William had a very good chance indeed of beating Leonard. Although he took no active part in the proceedings, his daily avocations took him amongst electors of all ranks, and, hearing their opinions, he was able to guess in which direction the current of popular favour was setting. Everybody liked Sir William; not a few shared his views; a somewhat important section of the community appeared to have come to the conclusion that turn-about was fair play. And then the energy and good-humour of the man won him many wavering adherents.

Leonard, on the other hand, was not very energetic ; he was not very well known ; and, although his meetings were respectably attended and his speeches received with applause, it was more than doubtful whether he had caught the ear of those uncertain voters who, by the irony of fate, rule the destinies of this land.

‘I’m getting left behind,’ Leonard himself told Matthew ; ‘I can feel it, though I’m assured that we ought to have a clear five hundred majority. But it would be as much as my place was worth to say so at the Grange. Uncle Richard has made up his mind that I am to romp in, and then advance with quick, easy strides to the Treasury bench. He told me in so many words yesterday that I need have no fear of being too poor to keep up a high position. Well, a man can but do his best !’

No man, certainly, can do more ; but the unfortunate thing is that not many men who fail are allowed credit for having done as much, and when Sir William Baxendale headed the poll with a majority of over two hundred, Mr Litton’s wrath against his nephew was all the greater because Leonard accepted defeat with becoming equanimity.

‘Oh, you need not take so much trouble to show that you don’t care,’ said he bitterly ; ‘that has been tolerably obvious all along. An absolute certainty thrown away through sheer laziness and indifference ! Well, since you think you were sent into the world for no other purpose than to amuse yourself, all I can say is that I trust you have the means of gratifying your tastes. What do you propose to do now, pray ?’

‘I have no very definite plan in my mind,’ answered Leonard, who knew that it would be useless to protest against the old man’s unreasonable anger. ‘What would you suggest?’

‘Oh, it is not for me to make suggestions; my one experiment in that direction has not had a very encouraging result. I was only wondering whether your next step would be to take a furnished house in London for the season.’

‘That is what I should have done if I had had the good luck to be returned, you know,’ said Leonard a little apprehensively; for the truth was that he had rather expected his uncle to pay the rent of the house in question.

‘And as you have not been returned?’

‘I think a month or two of London will be almost necessary; we could hardly begin to vegetate down at Stanwick forthwith.’

‘H’m! So your wife and your mother-in-law appear to think. For my own part, if I might venture to offer a suggestion, it would be that you should keep clear of debt and live within your income. Especially as your election expenses are likely to prove rather heavy, I’m afraid.’

With this extremely unkind speech, Mr Litton walked off, leaving Leonard to pull a long face and ask himself whether the old man could really mean to be as bad as his word. It was true that no promise had ever been made as to the defrayal of those election expenses; still there had been a tacit understanding that Leonard should not suffer for having complied with his uncle’s wish, and it would be a distinct breach of faith to inflict a heavy fine upon him because the electors had not proved equally accommodating. He confided his misgiv-

ings to Matthew, who subsequently broached the subject to Mr Litton, with very unsatisfactory results.

‘Let him pay,’ said the old gentleman shortly; ‘he has allowed himself to be beaten, and he must take the consequences of defeat. Perhaps this will teach him that prizes are not to be won by simply standing still and holding out your hand.’

‘And suppose he can’t pay?’ Matthew suggested.

‘I imagine that he can raise the required amount and more. If he finds himself pinched, so much the better. I am under no illusion, I assure you; I foresee that the day will come when I shall have to help him out of his difficulties. Only I prefer to wait until he is in a frame of mind to accept conditions as well as cheques. Believe me, my dear Austin, you don’t know that fellow yet. It is more to the credit of your heart than of your head that you don’t, and it is fortunate for me and for him, and perhaps for you too, that I know you both. Now we will say no more about it, please.’

CHAPTER XIV

GIVE AND TAKE

READY though Leonard was to take his beating, as beatings always ought to be taken, with good humour, he would have been better pleased if his wife had shown some little sign of participating in Mr Litton's and Lady Sara's mortification. Considering that what had happened to him was really a somewhat serious misfortune, she might, he thought, have remembered that it is a woman's mission to console. Also it might have occurred to her that another branch of woman's mission is to cajole, and that she ought to be bringing feminine arts to bear upon that intractable old uncle of his.

She did neither the one nor the other, because she was not personally disappointed by Leonard's failure and because she particularly disliked old Mr Litton. She wanted to keep her husband for herself; she had no wish to make a present of him and his time to the nation; while, as for her host, the truth is that he had not been at the pains to show her the slightest civility. If Lilian did not like Mr Litton, it is certain that Mr Litton did not like Lilian. He had his own opinion of her; he considered that she had jilted an excellent man for a worthless one, he thought her present demeanour towards Matthew shamelessly callous, and the fashionable jargon which

she had picked up in London displeased him. He detested fashionable ladies, detesting them none the less because he only knew them by hearsay, and he suspected that his nephew's wife would end badly. 'No accomplishments, no resources, a pretty face and a husband who will tire of her in a year—it's easy to foretell what that will lead to,' he said to himself.

Consequently, Lilian asked for nothing better than to leave Wilverton Grange. Her own wish was to go straight to Stanwick; but Leonard impatiently scouted such an idea.

'Wait till you have tried the north-east coast in spring!' said he; 'why, the place would be simply uninhabitable at this season of the year! Of course you must go to London and see your friends, like other people. It's a nuisance, because it will cost money and that old bear seems inclined to punish me by starving me out; still there's no help for it that I can see.'

'But I really have no friends whom I care a straw about in London,' Lilian declared. 'Why shouldn't we go to Stanwick and build up big fires? I suppose coal is cheap in that neighbourhood.'

'Oh, nonsense! You wouldn't be able to stand it for a week,' returned Leonard; 'and even if you could *I* couldn't. The very thought of such an existence—well, I beg your pardon, Lil,' he broke off, with a laugh, in answer to her reproachful look; 'I didn't mean to be rude. But life in the depths of the country, when there's neither hunting nor shooting nor fishing to be had, *is* rather slow work for a man, you know.'

After that Lilian held her peace. And indeed Lady Sara

quite agreed with her son-in-law that a season, or at least a fragment of a season, in London was indispensable. According to her lights, it was a matter of duty for the bride to be presented, on her marriage; she thought, too, that it would be a sad mistake to lose sight of the acquaintances who had proved amiable and hospitable the year before.

‘It is so easy to be forgotten,’ she remarked, ‘and there is really no excuse for your absenting yourselves just now. Later on, of course, excuses are apt to come in the natural order of things, and everybody understands; but for the present you ought to be *en évidence*.’

So, there being no symptom of the excuse alluded to, Lilian was taken by her husband to the flat which still remained upon his hands, where they made shift to instal themselves while looking out for a more commodious dwelling. They could not discover what they wanted within reach, save at an extravagant price, nor could they bring themselves to adopt the alternative of seeking refuge in the far west borders of Kensington; the task of house-hunting, always disheartening, was rendered doubly difficult for them because one of them did not know how much they ought to give, while the other (who declined to say) alternated between parsimony and recklessness. In the end he decided suddenly upon a house in Hans Place, which, although of modest dimensions, commanded a sufficiently imposing rent. The house-agent assured him that he was making an uncommonly good bargain and that it was not everybody who cared to leave such costly china or so much *bric-à-brac* at the mercy of a tenant.

Lilian could have done with a little less china and *bric-à-brac*; still the stowing of it away and the re-arranging of the furniture kept her fully occupied for some days and prevented her from feeling too lonely when her husband went out without her. It would have been absurd to expect that he should dance attendance upon her all day long; she acknowledged that, although she felt the change between the present state of things and those halcyon days in southern latitudes. Once, when she asked him where he had been, he answered, with a touch of irritation :

‘Oh, I’ve been at the club, if you want to know, but we mustn’t get into the habit of catechising one another, Lil. It’s a most reprehensible practice—almost as bad as opening one another’s letters.’

He favoured her with several of these half-good-humoured rebukes, some of which she may have deserved. He was, and was likely to remain, an indulgent husband; but he was a husband now, he was no longer an anxious and attentive lover. For the rest, it was not long before Lilian had little leisure time left her in which to lament over the inevitable. After Easter, everybody—in her limited sense of that term—came up to London, visitors and engagements grew unmanageably numerous and the successes of the previous year were more than repeated. If the statements of those who are in a position to speak with authority may be accepted, the social life of a very pretty young married woman who is blessed with friends and relations in high places must be a decidedly exciting and enjoyable one. These ladies, it is said, have a much better time of it than

their unmarried sisters, because their situation is a less ambiguous one—although some might think that their proceedings also were not invariably devoid of ambiguity. Be that as it may, Mrs Jerome went out a great deal and was immensely admired and did credit to her husband in all respects. It may be assumed that she enjoyed the admiration; it is certain that she enjoyed the excitement and that the sensation of being always in a hurry helped her to live only for the moment—which is as pleasant a way of living as another, while youth and health hold out.

That all this gaiety entailed expenditure scarcely needs to be said. The young couple—so Lilian's experienced relatives assured her—were not expected to entertain; still entertainment is, after all, a relative term, and the little house in Hans Place became the scene of frequent informal dinner-parties. Extravagance, too, is a relative term. What Leonard's annual income might amount to his wife had never been told; probably he himself could hardly have said—for how is a man to know, in these days, what his rents will bring him in?—but he took to grumbling at the household expenses and was so vexed when a curtailment of hospitality was proposed to him that that suggestion was not renewed. Lady Sara, who arrived from Wilverton in due course, and for whom a quiet lodging in the neighbourhood of Sloane Street was secured, advised Lilian not to worry too much about these sordid questions and above all not to worry her husband.

‘There is nothing a man hates so much as being made to economise in trifles,’ she said. ‘If he calls you a bad manager,

you mustn't mind. They all do that when pay-day comes—and then they forget about it unless you insist upon reminding them. Besides, you are sure to be better off before very long. Dr Jennings told Mrs Jennings, who told Mrs Frere, who told me, that poor old Mr Litton might die any day.'

No doubt this consolatory intelligence enabled Leonard to contemplate with fortitude a financial situation which might otherwise have been somewhat alarming. Moreover, he was careless and optimistic by nature; had he been less so, he would not have taken it for granted that Lilian was as entirely satisfied as he was with their present mode of existence.

There were, as a fact, features in it which did not satisfy her at all. She was no longer an *ingénue*, she had learnt a great deal and was quite aware that the manners of the present day are not unduly strait-laced; still she could not and did not like Leonard's flirtations. It was true that these were as often as not carried on under her very nose; it was probable that he meant nothing at all by them; and yet they exasperated her. Very likely they would not have done so if the ladies to whom he was pleased to devote himself could have denied themselves the satisfaction of an occasional triumphant glance in her direction. But they never do deny themselves that satisfaction; who knows what troubles and scandals might not be averted if they did!

Now, there was a certain Mrs Papillon, a tall woman with sleepy dark-blue eyes and a finely-developed figure, whose privilege it was to be at this time the subject of Lilian's special animosity. As she was no longer quite in her first youth, had

never been precisely beautiful and was intensely stupid, she might very well have been despised ; but Leonard, who laughed at her behind her back, had a way of gazing sentimentally into those violet eyes which was provoking to witness. He pretended to find her amusing and was fond, when he had a disengaged evening, of arranging combined visits to the theatre with her and her quiet little sandy-haired husband. It was after one of these joint expeditions (which always terminated with supper in Hans Place) that Lilian made a disagreeable discovery. The Papillons had wished her good-night and had left her free to indulge in the yawns which she had been politely devouring for several hours past, when she recollected that she had left some unopened letters in the morning-room. Going downstairs to fetch them, and passing the little sandy-haired man, who was seated in the hall, staring patiently at his shoes, she arrived just in time to overhear a few words, murmured by Mrs Papillon, while Leonard tenderly enveloped her in her opera-cloak. The words, to tell the truth, were silly rather than compromising, and Leonard did not look at all abashed by his wife's sudden appearance ; but Mrs Papillon's hastily-suppressed giggle made Lilian's blood boil. She maintained a show of composure until she was alone with her husband, and then said, in a voice which trembled slightly,—

‘Leonard, I will not have that woman in the house again. If you want to see her, you must contrive meetings with her somewhere else.’

‘My dear girl,’ he remonstrated, ‘don’t be so ridiculous ! I am sorry you heard what she said ; but really, you know—’

‘Really what?’ asked Lilian, speaking in a tone which he had not heard from her since their marriage and which reminded him unpleasantly of half-forgotten days gone by.

‘I did think you had too much good sense to be jealous!’ he exclaimed plaintively. ‘I suppose I ought to take it as a compliment; but—won’t it become a little inconvenient if I am never allowed to speak to any woman who isn’t either old or hideous?’

‘I don’t wish to put you to inconvenience,’ answered Lilian coldly; ‘you are perfectly free to amuse yourself in your own way, so long as you do not insult me publicly. But I will not receive Mrs Papillon again, and you can tell her so, if you like. I doubt whether she will be surprised.’

‘It is so likely that I shall tell her such a thing as that!’ returned Leonard, half laughing, half vexed. ‘Come, Lil! you don’t really imagine that I have been making love to Mrs Papillon, do you?’

‘Yes; since you ask me, that is just what I do imagine; she certainly wouldn’t have spoken as she did without a good deal of encouragement. You can go on making love to her, if you choose; only it must not be in your own house any more.’

Leonard might easily have made his peace with his wife there and then, and at the bottom of his heart he knew that he might; but he was annoyed with her for making a scene upon what he considered such very insufficient grounds, and he thought that to profess contrition and promise amendment would be a rather weak proceeding. So, with an eye to future comfort, he said,—

‘All this is the most dreadful nonsense! If you insist upon it, we can drop the Papillons, though I am not going to make you a general laughing-stock by announcing that you are jealous of the woman. But I must say that I don’t see how we are to go on seeing our friends at all, unless you are prepared to—how shall I put it?—to give and take a little.’

‘Are *you* prepared to give and take?’ asked Lilian, with an ominous tremor in her voice.

‘Certainly I am—within the usual recognised limits. I have complete confidence in you, and I think you might have rather more in me,’ answered Leonard virtuously. He added, after a pause: ‘London isn’t Arcadia, and life can’t be one long honeymoon, you know, Lil.’

‘Very well,’ she returned, gathering up her long skirt and moving towards the door; ‘I will endeavour not to shock you by behaving like a mere *bourgeoise* again. I think we clearly understand one another now—which, after all, is the main thing. As for Mrs Papillon, upon second thoughts, I won’t shut the door against her; it would be scarcely worth while, would it?’

Leonard was not quite sure, that night, whether he had gained a victory or not; but on the following day he felt no more doubt about the matter, for Lilian was in good spirits and appeared to have entirely got the better of her unexpected fit of jealousy. It was true that she held him at a certain distance and that some endearing epithets to which he had become accustomed had dropped out of her vocabulary; but that was not unnatural. He could understand her having felt hurt—

possibly even outraged—by an episode which was really without significance, and he would have offered her a frank apology, had he not been persuaded that it would be bad policy to do so. Meanwhile, he nobly resolved that he would make the silent concession of avoiding Mrs Papillon (who happened to bore him) from that day forth.

London, as Leonard had truly remarked, is not Arcadia, nor have two young married people who frequent the liveliest circles of its society much leisure left to them for billing and cooing. The Jeromes got on together wonderfully well for some little time, because during that time they were only nominally together, and one of them congratulated himself upon his wisdom in having made a stand against excessive prudery at the outset. He was not weary of his wife, he looked forward to a renewal of their former relations at some happy future date ; but for the moment he judged it expedient that she should learn to do as others did and assimilate the tone of that section of the community which it was her manifest destiny to adorn. He did not see, or perhaps did not choose to see, that she was taking him somewhat too literally at his word. With her face, she had not far to seek for admirers, nor did she repel the advances which were speedily made to her from various quarters. She began to be talked about ; the watchful and friendly dowagers who had been instrumental in launching her upon her career the year before warned her that it wouldn't do, and were politely snubbed for their pains. Then one of them deemed it as well to breathe a hint to Leonard, who kept his eyes open and saw sundry incidents which seemed to call for intervention on his part.

Driving home with his wife late one evening, he took occasion to say, in a tone of kindly reproval :

‘I don’t want to make any complaint, Lil, but of course you can’t know as much as I do about all the men whom you meet, and there are one or two fellows whom I would rather that you were not quite so familiar with.’

‘Are there?’ she returned, with a yawn. ‘If you will tell me who they are, I won’t be quite so familiar with them, then.’

He mentioned a few names and gave a few reasons for mentioning them ; to which she replied indifferently :

‘All right ; they shall be placed upon my black list.’

This ready acquiescence did not altogether please Leonard, who had anticipated something different. He meditated uneasily for a few minutes and then abruptly burst out :

‘I say, Lil, hasn’t this gone on long enough? Can’t we—well, kiss and be friends?’

‘Aren’t we friends?’ she asked, in a tone of sleepy surprise.

‘You know we are not ! I’m sorry I put your back up about Mrs Papillon, and you may have noticed that I scarcely ever speak to her now.’

‘Don’t you? I haven’t noticed.’

‘Well, so it is, anyhow, and of course I understand that you have been going on as you have done lately to punish me. I don’t grumble ; it was a fair retort enough—although it stands to reason that a man may do lots of things which a woman can’t safely do—but I think we might cry quits now.’

He took her hand, which she did not withdraw ; but he hardly knew what to make of her rejoinder.

‘ There is no need for this touching reconciliation,’ she said, laughing ; ‘ we haven’t quarrelled, and really, if you will believe me—but I suppose you won’t—I had no intention of punishing you. Oh, here we are at home, thank goodness ! I am too tired to talk any more now, but if you will remind me to-morrow about those men whom you don’t wish me to cultivate, I will make a point of neglecting them.’

CHAPTER XV

IN SEARCH OF A FRIEND

TO men of Leonard Jerome's cheery, eupeptic temperament, reflection, analysis and the weighing of one consideration against another are a weariness of the flesh. They have fits of deep dejection and resentment against Fate when things go askew with them; but these seldom last long, and beneath their despondency lurks always a happy conviction that somehow or other it will be all right in the end. Leonard, therefore, soon shook off the sensation of uneasy bewilderment which fell upon him after that brief colloquy with his wife. He did not understand what she would be at, he dimly perceived that she was not exactly the woman he had taken her for; but to try and arrive at a comprehension of her standpoint by recollecting what her education and early surroundings had been, and by making due allowance for the principle of heredity (a method which he would certainly have adopted, had she been a horse or a dog) would have been altogether foreign to his nature. It was much simpler to conclude that, despite her assurance to the contrary, she had meant to pay him out for his venial offence, and it was likewise for the comfort of a man who hated scenes to assume that the best plan was to say no more about it. She would 'come

round' if she was left alone, he thought—and he proceeded, with a light heart, to leave her alone accordingly.

Nevertheless, Lilian had spoken truly. She did not wish to punish her husband, nor did she believe that it was in her power to punish him by exciting his jealousy. All she wished was to forget, if possible, her own unhappiness, which was very great, and she took the means which came readiest to her hand. She was conscious of having sacrificed much—her self-respect amongst other things—for Leonard's sake, and she now saw that he had not been worthy of the sacrifice. She had, of course, been a little jealous of Mrs Papillon, and her husband's manner with other women had displeased her; but these were trifles: the real calamity was that Leonard no longer loved her—perhaps never had loved her nor experienced any sentiment with regard to her beyond admiration for her beauty and a desire to secure what had seemed to be denied to him. When to this it is added that she was young, that she had an intense natural craving for happiness and that her standard of rectitude was not a particularly exalted one it will be perceived that Mrs Jerome was in a somewhat perilous condition of mind.

Fortunately for her, peril did not chance to present itself at that time in a concrete form. The men whom she had allowed to whisper impertinences in her ear, and to whom, in compliance with Leonard's request, she now turned a cold shoulder, had neither interested nor amused her. They had kept her brain and her tongue occupied; but there were plenty of others equally available for that purpose. It cannot be said that she was discreet in her conduct; yet, on the other hand,

nothing definite could be alleged against her : the only remark that could be made—and it was made with some frequency—was that she was beginning to emancipate herself rather early in the day.

Madame d'Aultran, who came up to claim acquaintance at the French Embassy one evening, was full of arch allusions to the above effect and professed an extreme curiosity to hear what had become of 'that poor doctor—the most eccentric type that I have met with yet in your island of eccentricities. He was actually at your wedding, was he not?—and in a most conspicuous capacity. Now, that could not have happened anywhere in the world but in England!'

'Mr Austin is a great friend of my husband's,' said Lilian.

'And a little bit of yours, it must be avowed. And now he has retired to his province, eh? But perhaps he will emerge again when friendship calls—friendship for your husband, *bien entendu*. You allow him his fair share of liberty, *par parenthèse*, that husband of yours.'

Lilian had become callous to thrusts which would once have roused her ire.

'It is the custom to do so, is it not?' she returned carelessly. 'I have always understood that you favoured that system.'

'Oh, I!' cried Madame d'Aultran, with a shrieking laugh and an upward jerk of her bare shoulders—'I am not an Englishwoman, and I did not make a love-match. My husband does as he pleases and lets me do as I please. To be sure, you enjoy the same privilege, they say. It is all very interesting and a little comic. One thinks one has witnessed the whole drama; but

not at all! We have only reached the second act, and I am quite impatient for the *dénouement* and the reappearance of the faithful doctor. What puzzles me is the exact part he can be made to play; for, after all, he is an Englishman, and he seemed to me to be very practical, as well as very moral.'

Lilian did not take the trouble to reply; but in this time of her distress her thoughts often turned to the true friend whom she had injured and whom she had afterwards intentionally insulted. She knew now that her girlish affection for him had not been love; she knew also that she had cured him of his fancy. She did not regret having alienated him—it had been necessary to do that—but she sometimes longed for the sympathy and counsel which he might have given her. Neither the one nor the other could be expected from her mother, and it was the result of circumstances that she had not a single friend in the whole world. Thus she stood, facing the whole world and its temptations, a solitary, smiling figure, much envied by the majority of those who beheld her and with no other equipment against danger than a certain defiant, intermittent pride.

Leonard thought he was in great luck when he and his wife were invited to spend the Ascot week with Lilian's well-to-do cousins, who had taken a house at Sunninghill for that meeting. That they should forego Ascot altogether had not presented itself to him as a possible form of economy, although he had the best reasons for wishing to economise, and he had, as he said, contemplated 'pigging it by rail.' Now, however, the thought of being able to do things comfortably put him in such good humour that he could not find it in his heart to be ungenerous, and

he told Lilian to order herself some new frocks forthwith. She obeyed without hesitation and without gratitude, being well aware that he liked her to be handsomely dressed and having a suspicion that he even felt something of the complacency of ownership in watching the attentions of which she was the object.

If he did, he had his reward ; for no one was more universally admired on the first day of the meeting than the beautiful Mrs Jerome, nor were there many ladies present who received such trustworthy information from competent authorities as to the probable results of the racing. She had a few bets—not that she cared much either for sport or for gambling, but that it seemed a pity to disappoint those who had shown themselves so eager to oblige her—and she won her money. Leonard also, following her lead, speculated successfully ; so it was in a mood of radiant good-will towards all mankind that he conducted her to the paddock, late in the afternoon, to inspect the horses.

On their way thither they were overtaken by two gentlemen who wore the long, unbuttoned frock-coats and carried over their arms the crook-handled umbrellas of the period. One man in his London clothes looks so like another that they did not at first recognise the urbane individual who took off his hat and said, with cheerful familiarity, ‘Here we are again!’ But Lilian’s chin was raised and her eyelids dropped before he had time to state who he was, while Leonard, with a sudden vision of a dimly-lighted sitting-room in Palermo and an irate lady who declared that nothing on earth would induce her to speak to a certain person again, responded somewhat less cordially than was his wont :

'Oh, yes, Mr Frere, of course! I beg your pardon; I didn't know you were in England.'

'Home on leave of absence,' answered Spencer tranquilly; 'Arabella prefers to remain abroad for the present. We were sorry you had to bolt off from Sicily in such a hurry. You came back to fight the Wilverton election, didn't you?'

'And to lose it,' said Leonard.

'Well, it wasn't much of a loss, I should think. How any man can want to be in the House of Commons is a mystery to me—hard work, no pay and precious little sport, by all accounts. However, I believe, there are a good many men in the House who don't want to be there, eh, Vawdrey? Let me introduce my friend Captain Vawdrey—or perhaps I ought to say Mr Vawdrey, now that he has chucked the service.'

Spencer's friend, who had been gazing at Mrs Jerome in undisguised and open-mouthed admiration, accompanied his bow with an ingenuous blush. He was evidently a gentleman, and, with his fresh complexion, his slight fair moustache and his slim figure, might have passed very well for a subaltern in the Guards. He was, however, some years older than he looked, and was now, as Lilian presently ascertained from him, a full-blown M.P. She walked on towards the paddock with him, being determined to hold no parley with the offensive Spencer, who was apparently not to be shaken off, and she found him, notwithstanding a little preliminary shyness, very chatty, unaffected and communicative.

'Legislation isn't much in my line,' he told her, 'but I was obliged to go in for it when my poor old governor died, last

winter, and when I succeeded to the property. My mother wished it, and as he had held the seat for I don't know how many years they let me in without a contest. It's a funny thing that such a number of square pegs get shoved into round holes, isn't it? Lots of fellows would give their ears to be eldest sons, whereas I should have been as happy as possible with a pretty good allowance and my commission.'

'You were in the army, then?' asked Lilian.

'Yes, in the 22d Lancers. That's how I came to be acquainted with poor Frere.'

'Oh, he was a brother-officer of yours, was he?' said Lilian. She could not help adding, 'I should never have supposed so; he doesn't *look* like it.'

'How do you mean? He wasn't an officer, of course; he enlisted. But I believe he would have got his commission after a bit, if it hadn't been for an unfortunate row which spoilt his chance. His people have treated him awfully badly, you know.'

'I don't know much about it; but I understood that he had treated them rather badly,' Lilian said.

'Oh, well, I daresay he kicked over the traces in his youth; but it was hardish lines to cut him off with a shilling for that. He has had crushing luck, poor chap! That Mrs Johnson, who married him, is—well, she ain't a very nice sort of woman, you know, and as far as I can make out they have had a split already. What is going to become of him I'm sure I don't know. I'm afraid you don't much like Frere, Mrs Jerome,' he added, with a deprecating side-glance at his neighbour.

‘I’m afraid I don’t,’ answered Lilian, laughing, ‘and I doubt very much whether you would either, if you were not too good-natured to dislike anybody.’

She had taken a fancy to this boyish representative of his fellow-countrymen, who diffused an atmosphere of simplicity and kindness around him, and she thought it only right to warn him in a motherly way that friends of the type of Mr Spencer Frere are apt to prove expensive companions to young men of fortune. But Mr Vawdrey would not allow her to finish her sentence.

‘Oh, I assure you I’m not such a fool as I look,’ he interrupted eagerly ; ‘I know well enough that a rich man has got to harden his heart, and I’ve had one or two rather sickening experiences already. But you’re mistaken about Frere ; he doesn’t belong to the parasite class. Of course I can understand what you object to ; he has a nasty, swaggering sort of manner, and I wish he hadn’t. Only I think some allowance ought to be made for a fellow who, after all, is a gentleman by birth and who is always being treated as if he were a cad. I mean, if I were in his place I daresay I should be just as much inclined to snap my fingers in people’s faces as he is.’

‘Well, you know Mr Frere better than I do,’ said Lilian ; ‘perhaps you are right and I am wrong. Anyhow, we won’t quarrel over it.’

They did not quarrel at all ; on the contrary, they became remarkably good friends and exchanged many impressions while Leonard and Spencer were watching the saddling of the

favourite for the next race. Vawdrey, it appeared, occupied with some friends a small house close to that in which Lilian was staying ; he enjoyed the privilege of a slight acquaintance-ship with her cousins, and he asked her diffidently whether she thought they would mind his looking in after the races on the morrow.

‘It isn’t so much that I care about seeing them ; but I should like to meet *you* again, Mrs Jerome, if you would let me,’ he explained, with delightful candour.

‘And I should like very much to meet you again,’ Lilian returned ; ‘only I hope you won’t think it necessary to bring Mr Frere with you.’

‘Oh, he is going back to town to-night,’ the young man answered ; ‘I met him on the course an hour or two ago and gave him some lunch, that was all. I wish I could give him something more substantial than lunch, for I’m afraid he is hard put to it for a job, poor beggar ! Perhaps I may be able to lend him a hand later on, though ; we shall see.’

One of the many gentlemen who delighted to honour Mrs Jerome with their attentions coming up at this moment, Mr Vawdrey fell back, and she saw no more of him ; but she ascertained in the course of the evening that he had recently come into a fine property in Lincolnshire, that he was both liked and esteemed by all who knew him and that he was considered to be one of the most eligible young bachelors of the year. Leonard also spoke of him in appreciative terms, mentioning that he had asked him to call in Hans Place.

Lilian was glad to hear that ; for her new acquaintance (whom she inwardly described as 'a nice, healthy-minded boy') had refreshed her with his simple talk, and if she wanted a friend, she wanted still more somebody who could take her out of herself for half an hour at a time.

However, she did not come across him on the race-course the next day—which, unfortunately, proved a disastrous one for her husband. Leonard had never been much of a betting man ; but just now he was sadly in need of ready money, and, having won a little on the opening events of the meeting, he was tempted to follow his luck. The consequence was that he incurred somewhat heavy losses, and drove away from the scene of his discomfiture silent and gloomy. It was a pity that he found some disagreeable letters awaiting his perusal on his return, and it was an even greater pity that Lilian, seeing him moodily smoking a cigarette in the garden, with his hands behind his back, should have selected that opportunity of joining him and carelessly handing him over a sheaf of bills which the post had brought her. He snatched them roughly out of her hand, glanced over them and gave utterance to an exclamation of disgust which, to tell the truth, was both profane and unrefined.

'Well, now look here, Lil,' said he, 'we really must come to some understanding about this sort of thing. I'm not a millionaire, and if such bills as these are to be handed over to me for payment, I shall precious soon be a bankrupt. Anything more preposterous than your dressmaker's charges I never heard of in my life !'

‘I thought you wished me to employ a good dressmaker,’ she answered coldly. ‘Of course, when one does that, one has to pay for it; but I would very much rather that you made me a fixed allowance. Then I could undertake to keep within it.’

He had not yet made this customary arrangement, partly because he did not know what sum in respect of pin-money would be considered reasonable by a woman who went so much into society as Lilian did, and partly because he was growing more and more averse to the payment of ready money at stated intervals; but he felt that she was putting him in the wrong, and was therefore the more provoked with her.

‘I don’t remember your ever having asked me to give you a fixed allowance,’ he said; ‘probably it wouldn’t have made much difference if I had. I am sure I have told you often enough what I think ought to be ample for household expenses, but the bills generally come to nearly double that amount.’

‘I daresay I am a bad manager,’ answered Lilian. ‘All I can say is that, if I knew how much I had to dress upon I could dress accordingly. The best manager in the world couldn’t promise that the weekly bills should be kept down to a certain amount without knowing how many people were to be asked to dinner in the course of the week.’

Leonard sighed impatiently.

‘Where there’s a will there’s a way,’ he remarked. ‘It’s easy enough to accuse me of stinginess; but really I don’t think I ought to be expected to be my own housekeeper.’

The outrageous injustice of this speech was too much for Lilian's temper.

'You put words into my mouth which I have never used or thought of using!' she exclaimed. 'Do you want to pick a quarrel with me? If so, you might surely hit upon some more plausible means of doing it.'

'No doubt I might,' answered Leonard bitterly; 'but, as it happens, I don't want to quarrel; I prefer a quiet life. I only wish you to understand, once for all, that I can't afford to spend what you ask me to spend on your dress.'

Lilian had an angry, but entirely justifiable retort on the tip of her tongue. Before she could utter it, however, a deferential cough behind her caused her to turn her head, and thus she found herself face to face with Mr Vawdrey, whose approaching footsteps across the lawn had been unheard either by her or by her husband. That the young man had been an unintentional eavesdropper was made only too evident by his concerned countenance. He stood with his hat in his hand, looking so distressed and so foolish that Lilian could not help laughing, while Leonard said:

'Oh, how are you? Very good of you to look us up. I'm afraid I must leave Mrs Jerome to entertain you, because I have some letters to write before the post goes, but I daresay you'll be coming into the house presently.'

CHAPTER XVI

AN INTERRUPTION

LILIAN continued to laugh after Leonard had so unceremoniously turned his back on their visitor.

‘You see what lies before you,’ she remarked. ‘I suppose married people always squabble, and I suppose that in nine cases out of ten it is the same subject that starts the squabbles.’

‘Oh, I’m not going to marry for a long time, if I can help it,’ was Mr Vawdrey’s prompt reply. ‘I’d very much rather not—though my mother and the girls seem to be determined that I shall.’

‘Ah, then you won’t be able to help it. But never mind ; it doesn’t follow that you will have my husband’s bad luck.’

‘I only wish there were the faintest hope of my ever having his extraordinary good luck !’ the young man declared with fervour.

‘Thank you ; but I don’t see how you can tell whether his luck is good or bad. At any rate, you know from what you overheard just now that he finds a wife an expensive luxury.’

‘I’m awfully sorry that I stole upon you like that,’ Mr Vawdrey answered penitently ; ‘I’m always doing these stupid, clumsy things. As for what I overheard, all I can say is—’

‘No, don’t !’ interrupted Lilian, holding up her hand to

check him. 'I know exactly what you were going to say, and I assure you it would give me no sort of satisfaction to be told that I was in the right by a person who couldn't possibly judge. As a matter of fact, there isn't much excuse for me, because I was not at all well off before my marriage, and I ought to know how to economise. All husbands are cross when they are asked to pay their wives' bills; you will be just the same.'

'I don't think I shall,' he returned quietly; and Lilian quite understood what he meant. Remonstrances might, in the opinion of this unprejudiced gentleman, be permissible, but not such a tone as Leonard had seen fit to adopt. 'However, I'm not married yet!' he added, setting his teeth in a resolute fashion which caused her laughter to break out afresh.

In truth she found it very necessary to laugh, being a good deal more inclined to do the contrary. Hers was not a nature to pardon injustice readily, nor could she regard her husband's language as being what in reality it was, a mere petulant out-break, provoked rather than originated by her so-called extravagance. She thought just what she had said, that he wanted to pick a quarrel with her, and she was certain that if anything of his former love for her had remained he could not have spoken as he had done. For the moment, therefore, she was chiefly anxious to escape from the memory of these miserable dissensions, and as she strolled over the smooth sward with her companion, she contrived in some measure to accomplish that object.

For Vawdrey was really a delightful companion—would have

been delightful under any circumstances, and was especially so just now, when she thirsted for the society of some fellow-creature whose views of life were less stereotyped than those of the class into which she had been thrown against her will. He did not care about fashionable folks, he told her; he had a modest craving for adventure, and would have liked to be sent on active service to India or Africa. But since that could not be, and since the House of Commons claimed him for its own, all he could hope for was an occasional sporting trip to distant lands during the winter.

‘Not that I shall be allowed to absent myself for long at a time,’ he added ruefully; ‘there’s the property to be looked after, you see, and one’s insatiable constituents to be addressed. My mother says I must stick to my duties, whether I like them or not—which is right enough, I suppose. I wonder what you would think of my mother. Most people call her rather alarming, but she’s the kindest-hearted woman that ever breathed, really. My sisters are countrified sort of girls; but then I like that sort best, don’t you?’

‘Do I look as if I liked that sort best?’ asked Lilian, smiling.

‘No, I’m not sure that you do exactly; but it’s easy to see that you don’t like artificial things or people. I think one can generally tell whether one will get on with a person or not, and I knew before I had been talking to you five minutes yesterday that we should be friends—that is, if you would let me.’

Lilian was not at all disposed to refuse this frankly-proffered

friendship. There was just enough of admiration in the young fellow's eyes to be flattering, without being in the least disquieting, and it was a rest and relief to talk to a man whose aims were honest and honourable. In return for his confidences, she told him a good deal more about her life, past and present, than she was in the habit of mentioning to her usual associates, and she could see that he divined and sympathised with much that she did not mention. By the time that some of the other people who were staying in the house had sauntered out and joined them it had been agreed that Mr Vawdrey should find his way to Hans Place as soon as might be. Meanwhile, he promised that he would look out for her on the course the next day.

He kept his promise; but it was in vain that he searched high and low for the lady by whom he had been so greatly fascinated, and who at the moment when the Ascot Cup was being won and lost was far away from him both in body and mind. A blow which may fall at any time is as startling when it does fall as though it had never been anticipated, and the telegram which summoned Lilian to her mother's death-bed stunned and dazed her, obliterating the memory of all recent incidents. Leonard did not accompany her to London. He had offered to do so, and had said everything that was kind and sympathetic; but, either because he wished to keep his wife's spirits up or because he did not wish to lose a day's racing, or possibly from a combination of both motives, he had declared his conviction that this would prove to be a false alarm. So she had begged him to remain where he was and had set off by

herself, with the unconvincing speeches whereby he had attempted to reassure her still ringing in her ears.

‘Her ladyship is sinking fast,’ Lady Sara’s maid had telegraphed ; but this, as Leonard pointed out, had been said more than once before, and servants always make the worst of things. Lilian tried to hope during the journey, which she accomplished in an agony of impatience, owing to the many delays occasioned by the crowded state of the line ; but she felt sure that the end had come at last and that she would never vex the most indulgent of mothers by her waywardness again. Her mother had not always understood her, and of late there had been something of an unacknowledged estrangement between them ; but who had been to blame for these things ? Lilian, in her sorrow and remorse, took the entire blame upon herself ; it may be that the larger share of it did in truth belong to her.

When at length she reached the small and somewhat airless lodging which had been taken for Lady Sara, her worst fears received instant confirmation. The doctor who had been called in was leaving the house as she drew up, and he turned back to tell Mrs Jerome that there was absolutely nothing more to be done. He mentioned the nature of the attack, adding that it might have been, and he believed had been, surmounted, but that the patient had not strength enough left to rally.

‘We must be thankful that there is little or no pain and that the end, which cannot be many hours distant, will be a peaceful one,’ he said, with a furtive glance at his watch.

‘Oh, I have no doubt you have done all in your power,’

answered Lilian hurriedly, 'but she has been as bad—quite as bad as this before—once at Wilverton, and there was a doctor there, Mr Austin, who saved her. May I not telegraph for Mr Austin?'

'My dear lady,' replied the physician in charge of the case, 'if it will give you the slightest comfort to telegraph for anyone, by all means do so; only it is my duty to tell you that Mr Austin will be brought to London upon a fruitless errand. Pray, act as you please in the matter, however. I myself am obliged to leave you now; but I will return in the course of an hour or two.'

Lilian despatched her telegram: it was a forlorn hope, but she could not bring herself to resign it. Then she went into the sick-room, and then she knew for certain that she was in the presence of approaching death.

Lady Sara was still alive, and she recognised Lilian with the faintest of faint smiles; but all power of speech seemed to have left her, and her breath was drawn in long, irregular gasps. She had been like that since early morning, the nurse said, adding aloud, with the unconscious callousness which those to whom death scenes are familiar often display, 'The wonder is that she has lasted so long.'

Lilian, after begging the attendants to leave her, knelt down by the bedside and took her mother's cold hand in both her own. There were many things which she wished to say, and she tried to say them; but it was difficult to tell how much or how little the dying woman understood of those self-accusations and entreaties for forgiveness. She was, at any rate,

unable to respond, save by an occasional feeble pressure of the fingers. Twice she struggled to speak ; but the result was only a hoarse, unintelligible whisper, and after a time Lilian, fearing to distress her, fell back into silence.

Thus hour after hour passed slowly away. The incessant roar of the traffic outside, the hot, vitiated air which rose in puffs through the open window, blowing the blind inwards, the drone of an Italian organ round the corner and, as the afternoon wore on, the shrill cries of the newspaper-boys, announcing the latest telegrams with the list of winners—all these things served as a continuous, relentless background for Lilian's miserable musings. To the world at large it is absolutely of no consequence whatever whether we are well or ill, living or dead. No reflection can be more trite ; yet there are few which, at certain times, strike us as more sad or more strange. Do what we will, we cannot realise our own insignificance until it is brought home to us in some commonplace, convincing fashion, and somehow or other it hurt Lilian more to hear two butcher boys exchanging jocular repartees on the doorstep than to remember, as she did every now and then, that Leonard was amusing himself on Ascot Heath.

It was not much or often that she thought of Leonard ; what was vividly present to her mind was an epitome—so far as she was able to form one—of the life which was now drawing to its close. Constant physical suffering, struggles to keep up a decent appearance upon insufficient means, secret anxieties which had been hinted at every now and then—there seemed to have been very little else in poor Lady Sara's

existence, as her daughter had known it. But there had been no grumbling or repining, no selfishness, no lack of such sympathy as she had had it in her power to give. Doubtless there are not a few highly venerated personages whose record is less creditable and whose reward has been more apparent. Lady Sara Murray had been what is called worldly, circumstances having rendered her so, just as circumstances have rendered certain other people what is called religious. She had, however, tried to do her duty, according to her conception of it, and it may be hoped that certain other people can say as much for themselves. Lilian, for one, did not feel entitled to make any such boast. She had indeed loved her mother; but she had not been guided by her; she had always taken her own way, and of late—so it seemed to her—she had viewed with cold indifference the loneliness to which that uncomplaining mother had been condemned.

From time to time the nurse looked in and, after a quick, professional glance, retired; between five and six o'clock the doctor reappeared, said a few words, suggested to Mrs Jerome that she should take a little refreshment and then went away, promising to call again later.

'There is scarcely any pulse,' the nurse remarked, after his departure; 'I don't think it can be long now. But really you had better let me bring you a cup of tea, ma'am.'

Lilian shook her head.

'I don't want anything, thank you,' she answered. 'I will call you when—when you are needed.'

It was about an hour after this that Lady Sara stirred uneasily.

She seemed to be trying to raise her head, her eyes were opened wide, there was an eager, appealing look upon her pinched features, and Lilian, gathering that she wished to say something, stooped over her. In long gasps, with a break between each, the words came—

‘Very good to me—kiss me, dear—God bless you.’ Then there was something incoherent about ‘temptation,’ and then, with a supreme effort and in clearer accents, ‘But never leave him, dear—never leave your husband, whatever happens! Promise!’

The promise was given, and the anxious mother’s eyes closed for the last time upon a world in which she had not played a prominent part, and from which she would be missed for a while by one human being only. Perhaps she had seen and known more than she had cared to talk about; perhaps her old dread of the family tendencies had never been quite allayed: in either case, she had up to the last done what in her lay to preserve her daughter from misfortune.

When Matthew Austin arrived, late that night, he was received by Leonard, who had come up from Ascot and who seemed surprised to see him.

‘Unfortunately, I was not at home when Mrs Jerome’s telegram came,’ Matthew explained, ‘but I started as soon as I could. Am I in time to be of any use?’

Leonard shook his head.

‘Oh, it’s all over,’ he answered; ‘the whole thing has been very sudden, and I suppose Lil must have forgotten that she had telegraphed for you, for she said nothing to me about it. I’m

very glad you have come, though. Perhaps you may be able to do something with her—I can't. She won't leave her mother's room and she'll hardly answer when she is spoken to. Of course it's awfully sad, and I'm very sorry for her and all that ; still she ought to go home and get a little rest now, don't you think so?' Leonard was evidently smarting under a sense of ill-usage ; and indeed he had lost more money that day, so that he was hardly in a fit frame of mind to cope with feminine unreasonableness. He added with a self-pitying sigh, 'I've had no dinner yet,' and he was quite willing to commit the management of a delicate task to his more experienced friend who said :

'Go away and get your dinner, then ; I'll look after Mrs Jerome. I think you will have to let her stay here to-night ; if she wants to do so, but we will get her home in the morning. I will give her a sleeping draught, if necessary.'

'Has he gone?' was the first question that Lilian put to Matthew, whom she did not recognise until she had stared frowningly at him for a minute ; and on receiving an affirmative reply, she drew a long breath of relief. 'He has been saying such horrible things to me !' she murmured. And then, after passing her hand across her forehead, 'He means to be kind, but he doesn't seem to understand that I *can't* leave her !—*you* understand.'

Matthew understood well enough ; but it was only by the exercise of a good deal of patience and finally by the assertion of medical authority that he could induce her to quit the room where her mother's body lay. Then she had to be forced to eat

and drink, which was no easy matter, nor was it until he had spoken so sharply to her as to bring the tears into her eyes that she would obey the orders which he felt constrained to give. Having once yielded, however, she became suddenly and pathetically docile, and from that moment he had no further trouble with her.

He was obliged to go back to Wilverton the next morning ; but he contrived to return before nightfall, and he stayed with the Jeromes until after the funeral, looking after all details for them and making himself useful in such a quiet, matter-of-course way that it seemed scarcely necessary to thank him.

‘No wonder they call you the medicine-man !’ Leonard said, with a half-compunctious laugh, when all had been done that could be done; ‘you certainly have a most amazing faculty for taking burdens off other people’s shoulders and making rough places smooth and looking as if you liked it all the time. I suppose the fact is that you do like it. It’s a dangerous reputation to have acquired, though. You may depend upon it that if ever I find myself in a hole, I shall come straight to you.’

‘I sincerely hope you will,’ Matthew answered. ‘But at the same time I hope you will try to keep out of holes.’

He knew that his friend was not too well off, and, careless though he himself was about money matters, he could not help seeing that the household in Hans Place was not being managed upon economical principles. Lilian, too, had let fall some casual remarks which had led him to fear that there might be trouble in store for her and her husband. For the rest, he did

not suspect the existence of any breach between them, while the resentment which he had not unnaturally harboured against his former love had become greatly softened both by compassion for her in her sorrow and by her behaviour to him, which had reverted very nearly to what it had been in her childish days.

‘Mamma would be pleased if she knew how kind you have been to me,’ was her parting speech. ‘I don’t think I could ever have got through these dreadful days without you ; and now that you are going, I feel as if—as if there was nobody !’

‘Is Leonard nobody?’ asked Matthew with a smile.

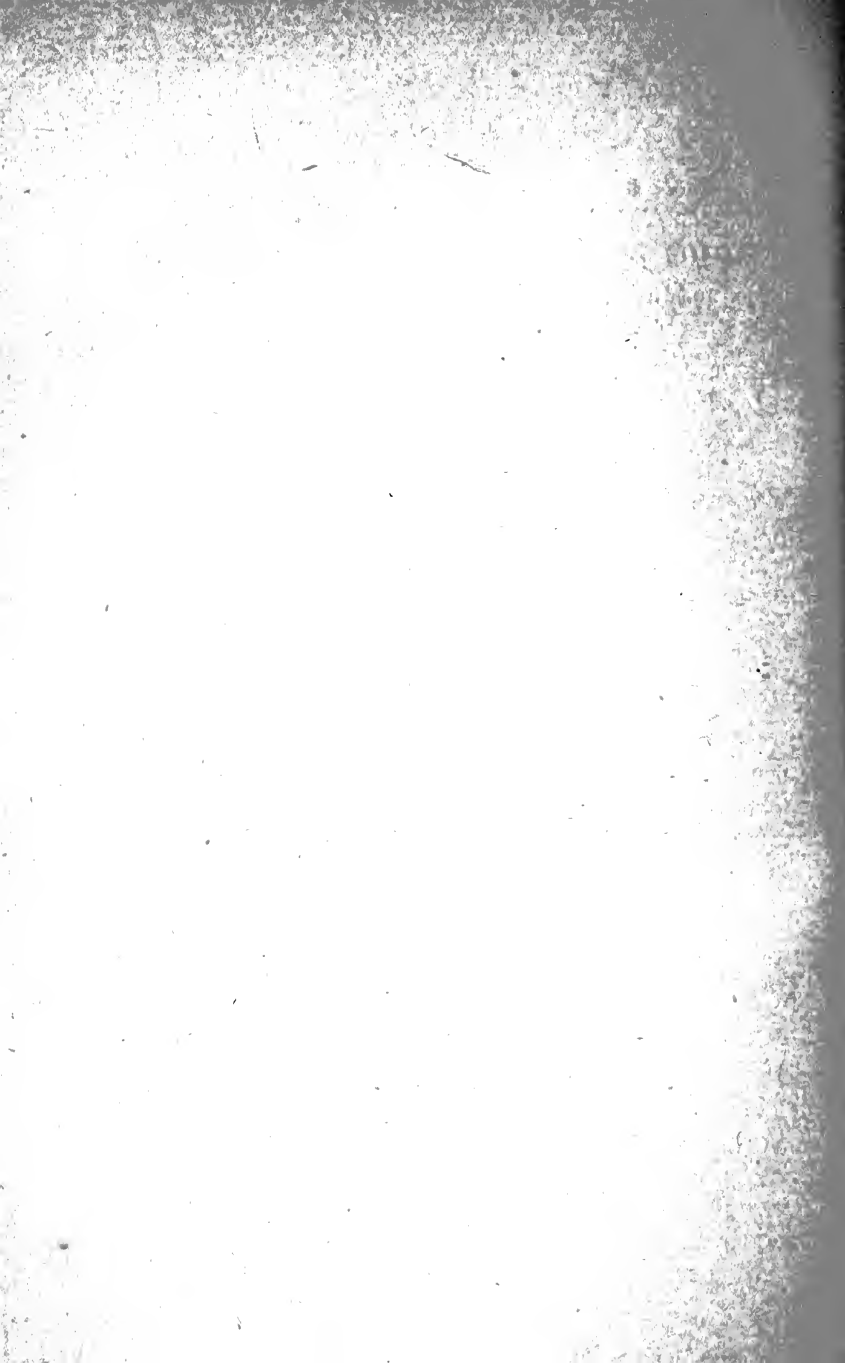
‘Leonard hardly knew my mother and never cared for her ; there was no reason why he should. She was nothing to him, except an old lady, who was in bad health and who could not be expected to live long. Perhaps she would have been nothing more than a rather interesting patient to you, if you were like other people ; but then you are like nobody else. I often wish that you were different in some ways.’

‘In what ways?’ inquired Matthew, who had no idea of her meaning.

‘I shall only seem impertinent if I tell you ; but— isn’t it rather a pity *never* to think of yourself? You lose all sorts of things that you might have and you don’t seem to mind. Yet you *must* mind ; and not one person in a hundred realises that pure unselfishness is at the bottom of it all.’ She paused for a moment before adding abruptly : ‘Why should you let Sir William Baxendale push you aside? It doesn’t follow that you do other people a service every time that you efface yourself.’

She turned away, without allowing him time to make any rejoinder, and as he got into his hansom it occurred to him that her words admitted of more than one interpretation. The allusion to Miss Frere was an old story; he was scarcely disconcerted by it; but could she mean that he had rendered her no service when he had retired in Leonard Jerome's favour? If she did, there might be worse troubles awaiting her than those pecuniary ones which he foresaw.

END OF VOL. II.



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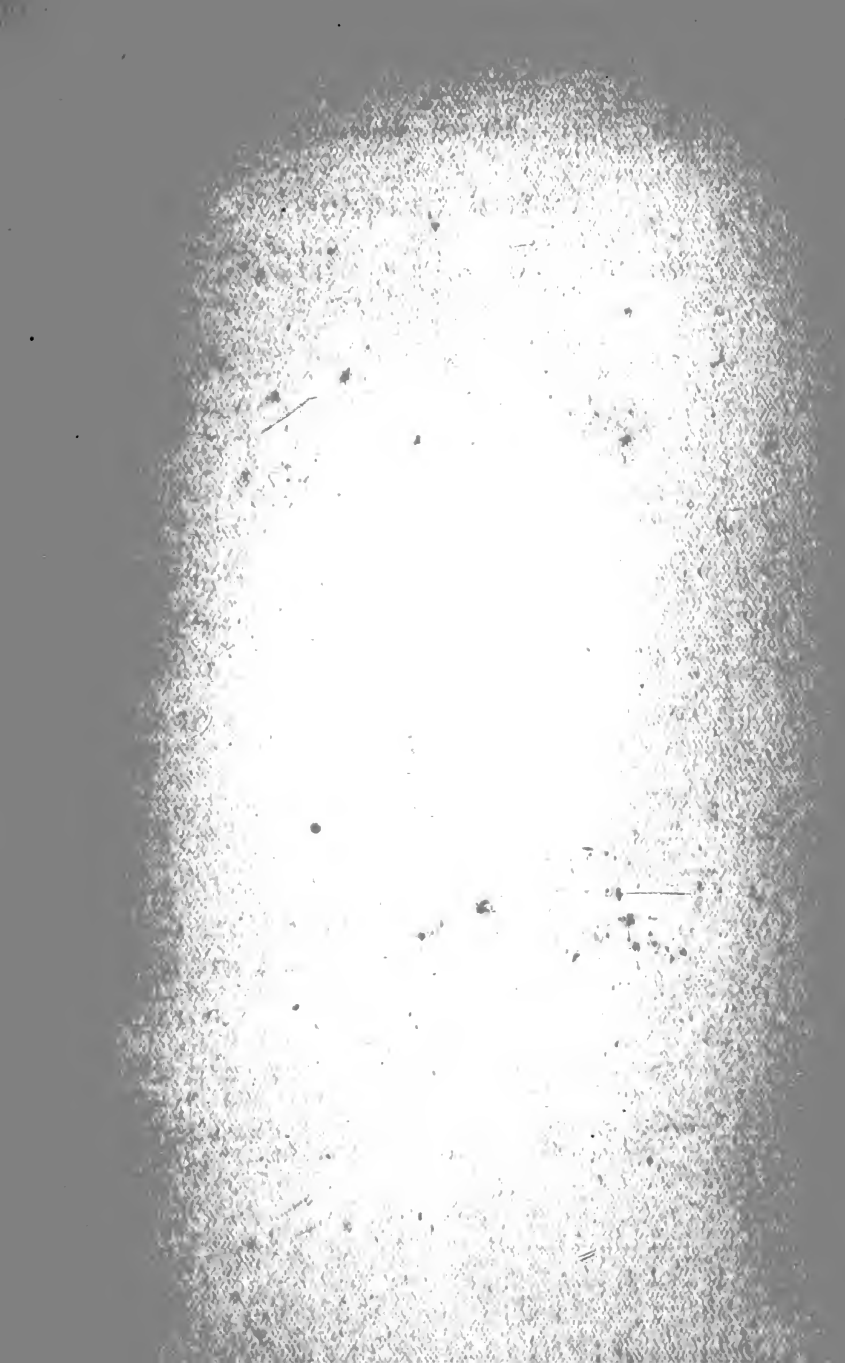
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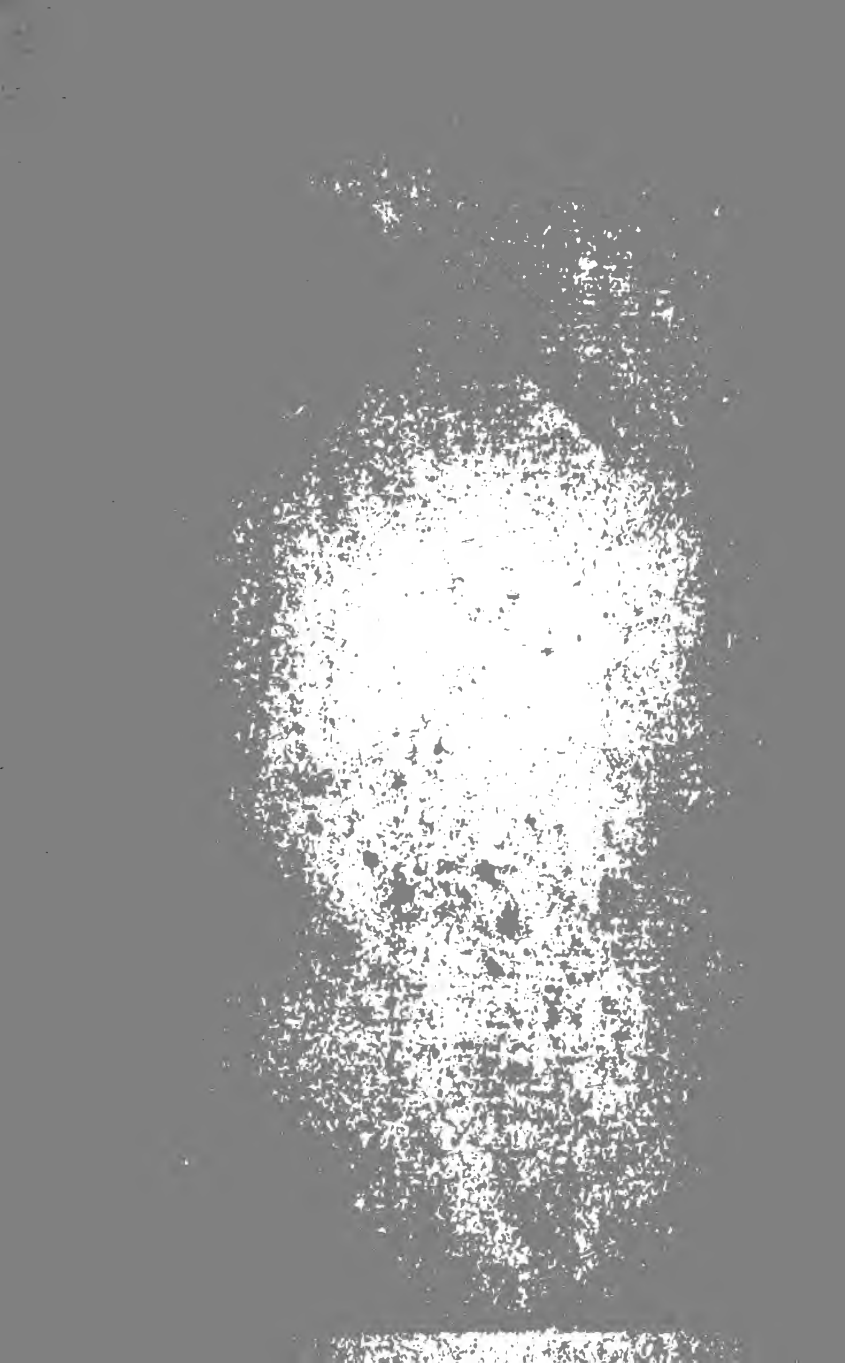
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